

## [Disclaimer](#)

### **Great Expectations**

#### **Part 1**

"Oh, Wow!" Amanda sighed, easing back into the softness of the sheets, the down mattress cover embracing her as surely as her husband, Lee Stetson, just had.

Lee, his heart pounding and his breath still coming in short ragged pulls, rolled off of his wife, flinging an arm over his eyes. "Oh, my god, Amanda," he puffed. "I thought I was the one that was supposed to be wearing you out?"

Amanda chuckled, reaching over to run a finger down her husband's bare, heaving chest. "You're out of shape, Scarecrow," she admonished, jokingly.

He shot her a glance from where his eyes hid under his forearm. "Out of shape, huh? Well, I didn't hear you complaining a few moments ago... or a half hour ago... or an hour before that... or..."

"Okay, okay," Amanda laughed, pulling the tangled sheet up to cover her naked breasts, much to Lee's chagrin. "I get your point." At his look, she blushed.

Lee pulled his arm down and smiled at Amanda, picking up one of her hands and clasping it in his. "You're incredible... you know that?"

"What?" she shrugged, enjoying the play of his fingers on hers.

He caught her brown eyes and held them fast with hazel ones. "You're just the most amazing woman I've ever known, that's all."

"Well, Mr. Stetson, I think you're pretty amazing yourself," she smiled warmly at him. "But what's really amazing is that we were lucky enough to find each other. By the way, happy anniversary."

"Happy anniversary, Amanda." A sparkle of laughter lit his eyes. "Yeah. Boy, ya know, I should send Don a thank-you note," Lee grinned mischievously at her.

"Don?" Amanda quizzed him, confused and wary of the look he was giving her.

"Don, Dan, David, whatever his name was...that weather guy that you were taking to the train station that morning. I think from now on, every year, on the anniversary of this day, I'm gonna send him a card. Don't you think that would be nice?" Lee smirked, kissing the palm of her hand.

"It was Dean, and no, I don't think it would be nice." Amanda reached up and tweaked his nose. "You know, I think it wouldn't have mattered. One way or the other, I think we were destined to meet each other." At Lee's look, she continued. "I know, I know, you think I'm crazy...how else in the world would we have met, you being a spy and me being a housewife? But I just know, in my heart, that if it hadn't happened on this day, five years ago, it still would have happened. Some day, some how... it was fate."

"No, Amanda, I don't think it's crazy." He reached over to push a stray lock of her tousled hair behind her ear. "You're right. We were meant to be. Soul mates—"

"Soul mates—" she said with him.

They smiled into each other's eyes. It had taken them so long to get to this point. However, neither one of them would have traded one fraction of one moment in their journey towards this love. How they'd been thrown together, and what they'd had to go through to find love and then to keep it, only made them cherish their union even more.

As Lee ran his fingers through her hair, gently grasping her neck to pull her into a kiss, she thought perhaps they did owe Dean a thank-you for the part he played in the anniversary they were celebrating. The thought quickly flitted from her mind as Lee pushed her down into the bed, once again giving her absolutely nothing to complain about.

## Part 2

"Lee, can I see you for a moment?" Billy Melrose's voice caught up with Lee just as his hand reached for the doorknob of the Q-Bureau.

"Sure, Billy. Meet you in the bullpen?" Lee pushed the door open a fraction, turning to look at his boss over his shoulder.

"No, Scarecrow, nothing that serious," Billy chuckled. "The Q-Bureau will be fine."

"Say did you see the game Sunday?" Lee asked, holding the door of the office open for Billy. "Damn if the Skin's don't like to keep you on the edge of your seat every game."

"Yes, and I had money on... "

Lee, following Billy in, wondered at his superior's sudden loss for words.

Billy was staring at Amanda's desk. Actually he was staring at Amanda. A very peaceful, happy and soundly sleeping Amanda.

Lee's jaw dropped open at the sight. Amanda's head was nestled in the crook of an arm, her other arm outstretched, her manicured fingertips just barely grazing the end of the desk. Just beyond her, still opened, was the file she must have been reading when she drifted off.

Billy looked a question back at Lee.

Lee shrugged. He cleared his throat, hoping to awaken his sleeping beauty, but she was obviously out like a light.

Billy couldn't help but smile. Amanda was one of his very favorite agents and a dear friend. It had been obvious in the last week or so that Amanda had been feeling exhausted. He'd caught her yawning through his weekly staff meetings and had noticed the slight dark circles under her eyes. Billy had just chalked it up to the very active caseload she and Lee shared, and the fact that they were still newlyweds.

"Lee," he admonished, a gleam in his dark eyes. "Can't you let this poor woman have some sleep at night?"

Lee shot him a look telling him he didn't appreciate the teasing.

He walked over to Amanda's desk, touching her shoulder lightly. "Amanda," he called, softly. When she didn't move, he shook her shoulder gently. "Amanda!"

Brown eyes, glazed from sleep, showed briefly behind fluttering eyelashes as Amanda tried to pull herself from the dream she was having. She'd been dreaming she was asleep, curled up in her king-sized bed, the comforter drawn up to her chin. She really wanted to get back to that dream. She turned her head to the other side, trying to elude the voice and touch that were interrupting her slumber. "Five more minutes, Mother, please?" she mumbled.

"Amanda!" Lee's voice rose and finally caught her full attention. She jerked upright, her hand coming up to the side of her face, wiping away the tiny bit of drool that had formed in the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, my gosh." Her eyes began to focus on her husband and her boss. "I must have dozed off," she stumbled, embarrassed.

"Dozed off?" Lee cocked his head, grinning at his still bleary-eyed wife. "You were out for the count, Amanda."

Amanda smiled sheepishly at Billy, then shot a 'thanks a lot' look at Lee. "Oh, don't be silly, Lee, I must have just closed my eyes for a moment while reading the... ah... the... ah... "

Lee picked up the file folder from her desk, reading the label. "Grettish?" he supplied.

"... Grettish file," Amanda continued, nodding. "Yes, absolutely, that was it... the Grettish file." She nodded, more to convince herself than the two men now watching her with bemused expressions.

Billy's look softened. "Amanda, look, I know you've been pretty beat lately. Maybe you need to take some time off, just to recharge your batteries."

"Oh, sir, my batteries are just fine. I mean, I'm just fine, sir. Just a little tired, that's all. Lee and I have been pretty busy finishing up the.... ah... .the.... ah.... "

"Grettish... " Lee supplied again.

"... case," Amanda finished.

Lee shook his head at his wife. She was normally, under the best of conditions, able to go off on a tangent and ramble away with the best of them, but he'd never seen her quite as off-kilter and easily flustered as she'd been the last few weeks.

Billy looked over at Lee. "When was the last time she took a vacation, Scarecrow?"

"We both took a long weekend about a month and a half ago, Billy. But if you think she needs another one... " Lee glanced a concerned look at Amanda. Was Billy really worried about her? Should he be? She did look tired and lately she had been very forgetful and absentminded. He'd just chalked the fatigue and lack of focus to their busy work schedule and the fact they were still getting used to married life, both professionally and personally. It hadn't been easy for either of them, once they'd come clean about their wedding, to work out the details of their new life together. Lee had wanted to buy a new house, immediately. Amanda wanted him to move into 4247 Maplewood for a while. There had been numerous discussions about joint checking accounts and life and health insurance, and there had been the time that Amanda had let Dotty back his car out of the driveway. Neither of them had known how difficult it was going to be trying to combine their lives. Perhaps the stress has just been too much for her, Lee thought with a frown.

"I think it might not be a bad idea, Scarecrow. The agent candidate classes can be very grueling and handling a full caseload with you on top of that, well, it might just have her stressed too far," Billy added.

"Hello? I'm here! You're talking about me like I'm not here," Amanda piped up, standing up to face both men. When she had their attention she finished, "Look, I'm pleased as punch that you're both so worried about me, but really, I'm fine. I don't need a vacation. I don't want a vacation. I don't have time to take a vacation."

"Amanda," Lee drew out the name in frustration. "If you're falling asleep at your desk, that means something."

"Yes, Lee, it certainly could mean something. You know, I have been feeling a bit tired lately, most likely a touch of the flu that's going around, that's all."

"Well," Billy inserted, "I think we need to find out for sure. Amanda, make an appointment with Dr. Richter and get a check-up."

"Sir, I have my annual check up with my personal doctor early next week," she began.

"Even better. We just want to make sure you're okay. If it's the flu, fine. If not, and it's stress, you might need to take some time off, just to recharge those batteries." He smiled fondly at her, and turned to leave.

"Nothing..." she started as she watched him exit the Q-Bureau. "... wrong with my batteries," she finished to the closed door. She turned to glare at Lee.

"What?" he yelped.

She didn't answer, continuing to stare daggers at him.

"Oh, no," Lee threw up his hands, turning his back on her and walking over to his desk. "I am NOT going to take the blame for this. No. No. No. Not this time."

Amanda sat down slowly, her eyes never leaving her husband. "Not this time?"

Lee shot her a nervous glance, then feigned extreme interest in his desk blotter.

"Not this time?" she repeated. "And what's THAT supposed to mean? Not THIS time?"

"Nothing," Lee shrugged, not meeting her eyes. "It meant nothing... poor choice of words." *Okay, Stetson, just walk away, don't say any more, discretion is the better part of valor.* "It's just that lately it seems like everything is my fault." *Open mouth, insert foot.*

"Ummm HmMMM, I see," Amanda said slowly, fiddling absently with the now forgotten Grettish folder.

"Not that some things aren't my fault," he backpeddled furiously. Then, seeing the stubborn look in Amanda's eyes, something snapped. He'd had enough. He wasn't going to run from her recent bad temper any more. He was the Scarecrow. The Agency's top operative. He could handle this. Lee straightened up in his chair, pulling himself to his full height. "It's just things like the dishwasher not working are NOT my fault, Amanda. Neither is the cheese going moldy or you running out of panty hose or the car not starting or the vacuum sucking up one of your earrings. I have no control over these things, and yet, somehow, lately, they've all ended up being my fault. Just like now... you fall asleep at your desk, Billy catches you and it's suddenly my fault. Tell me, how is that fair?"

Amanda's eyes narrowed and Lee felt a nervous tickle at the back of his neck. *Like a noose tightening?* He watched as she stood, slowly, and reached down to pull her purse from the desk drawer. She walked over to the coat rack and retrieved her red woolen pea-coat, shrugging into it, deftly buttoning it up and then tying her scarf and tossing the loose ends back over her shoulder. During the entire process, she never took her steely eyes off him. Then, suddenly, she turned on her heel, giving him her back, and strode to the door. She was almost through it and Lee had just let go the breath he'd been holding, when she turned back to him.

"Scarecrow, nobody ever said life was fair." Her mouth smiled at him, her eye's didn't.

*Yikes!* He made a quick note on the pad of paper on his desk. When in a tight situation, even the Agency's top agent needed the right ammunition. *Pick up large box of Devarona Chocolates on way home.* He looked again at the closed door. *And roses.*

### **Part 3**

"Amanda, did you hear me?" Dr. Penny Brice asked, looking over the lab reports in her hand. When she didn't get an immediate response, she looked up, over the rim of her half glasses to see if her patient had heard her. "Amanda," she smiled, "I take it this was unexpected news?"

Amanda blinked slowly once and then twice, staring fixedly on her wedding ring. Finally, she turned bewildered eyes to the woman seated behind the large cherrywood desk. "Ah.... unexpected... yes, you could say that," she said weakly, trying to swallow the large lump that had suddenly taken up residence in her throat.

Penny smiled softly. She'd known Amanda for going on twenty years. While she was an OB-GYN, she'd also been Amanda's primary care provider since she started her practice after graduating from George Washington University, and she had delivered both Phillip and Jamie. She considered Amanda more than just a patient; she was a friend. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

Amanda smiled back into the face of her friend and doctor, her eyes moist with tears. "Yeah, I'm okay... just a little shocked. Penny, it never even crossed my mind."

"Well, it's been a long time and you weren't expecting to be... "

"Expecting?" Amanda laughed, pulling out a tissue from her purse and dabbing at her eyes. "No, I wasn't. Gosh, I can't believe it. I mean, I just never... I mean we haven't.... well, I mean we have... obviously... although we used protection... I just can't believe it.... everything's just been so hectic what with the wedding and then Lee moving into the house and work and school and the boys..." Amanda stopped for a moment, for a breath. "You know, Penny, I'd really like to have a word with the manufacturers of that diaphragm."

Penny's laughter filled the room.

Amanda's eyes widened and her smile broadened with a thought. "Oh my gosh, Penny, I have to tell Lee."

"Yes, Amanda, you do... you sure do."

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"Lee, I have some wonderful news. No, that's not right. Okay... Lee, Darling, I have some incredible news. No, that's not right either. Sweetheart, I have the best news. Oh, no, that's terrible!" Amanda stomped on the brake, coming to a stop at a light on Glebe Road.

The entire drive from Penny's office she'd been trying out ways of breaking the news to Lee about the baby and nothing seemed right. The thought dawned on her that nothing seemed right because she wasn't giving the event the treatment it deserved. This was Lee's first child...their first child together. It had taken them so long to find each other and then even longer for them to admit their love for one another...now there would be a child of that love and a simple declaration didn't seem worthy. Her mind ticked over the possibilities of how she could tell Lee. "Ah, ha, I have it!" she exclaimed. "Oh, he'll be so surprised."

The light changed and Amanda swung the Wagoneer into a wide U-turn, heading back towards Georgetown.

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How could such a good idea have turned out so badly? All she'd wanted to do was surprise her husband and tell him, in a memorable way, that he was going to be a father. How could something that started with such good intentions have gotten so complicated? Amanda could feel the bottom dropping out of the situation as she tried to explain things to Billy. She sunk further down into the chair opposite his desk. If Billy couldn't help her, how would she ever get this mess straightened out?

Billy sat at his desk, his head in his hands, while Francine sat on the sofa behind Amanda, an obvious "I told you so" look of smugness on her face. "Amanda," Billy looked up, propping his chin on his fists. "Could you go over this one more time... just to make sure I understand everything?"

"Yes, sir, " she gulped. She took a deep breath and, seeing this, Francine leaned back, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and index fingers. "Okay, it started with some news that I wanted to let Lee know about. Not work news, sir, just something... ah... of a personal nature. I thought it would be cute to set up this fake drop where he could get the information. I phoned him and told him that he needed to pick up a message at this drop site that we use when we're relaying information between family members. Lee's Agency family members, sir, not our real family members. We don't use drops, of course."

Francine grunted and stretched out on the sofa, pulling the side pillow over her face.

"Well," Amanda continued, trying to ignore Francine. "That's when I get the call from Lee telling me that there was no message at the drop. Well, I told him there had to be a message. I mean, sir, I put it there so I knew there was a message, but he said no, there was definitely no message for him to pick up at the drop site. Then I got the other call."

"From Augie?" Billy supplied, allowing Amanda time to breathe.

"Yes, sir, from Augie," Amanda nodded. "He said he had some information that he thought that Lee might be interested in purchasing. He'd intercepted a message that was being relayed to Lee and was auctioning it off."

"That information being..." Billy interrupted.

"My fake message from the drop site, sir." Amanda looked down at her hands.

"Go on," Billy encouraged.

"I tried to explain to Augie the message was meaningless... well, I mean it wouldn't mean anything to anyone other than Lee and me, but he didn't believe me."

"Imagine that," muttered Francine from under the pillow.

"Well, he didn't and he told me to have Lee call him. Well, sir, I couldn't have Lee call him because then he might actually offer something for the message and it's worthless. To the Agency. Not to us. But Lee wouldn't know that. And if I told him the message was worthless, well, then I'd have to tell him what the message was about and I didn't really want to have to do that AND explain how I'd kinda messed things up by planning this little surprise."

"There's no 'kind of' involved here, Amanda. You totally messed things up." Francine's voice again piped up from under the pillow.

"I know I messed things up, Francine; now I'm trying to unmess them," Amanda shot the pillow a nasty look.

Francine tossed the pillow onto the floor, sitting up. "By putting the Agency into a bidding war with the Soviet Union over a worthless prank message?"

"It wasn't a prank, Francine," Amanda breathed harshly. "It was a surprise for Lee..."

"Well, he's definitely going to be surprised," Francine smirked.

"Enough you two." Billy glared at both his agents. "You hear me? We've got our hands full right now trying to put the lid on this. Francine, I'm going to have you talk with Augie and get that message back before any more damage is done." Francine nodded her agreement. "Amanda, Lee's headed for Williamsburg?"

"Yes, sir, he'll be there until tomorrow afternoon working on the Cameron case. He said he'd be back in time for the staff meeting tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay," Billy paused, looking pointedly at Amanda. "Needless to say, I hope that we never have to deal with anything like this again. Next time, Amanda, dinner and a nice bottle of wine is a more acceptable way to break good news. Now, the two of you get out of here and get back to work; I've got some mopping up to do."

Francine bolted through the door before Billy could even finish. Amanda stopped at the doorway and looked back. "Mr. Melrose, I am so sorry..."

Billy's face softened from anger to resignation. "I know, Amanda... just be more careful next time, okay?" As she turned to head out he continued, "Oh Amanda, considering the news I think you were trying to let Lee in on? You'd better forego the wine."

They shared a smile before Amanda left, pulling the door closed behind her.

#### **Part 4**

A gust of cold air blew into the Georgetown foyer as Amanda entered IFF the next morning. The sun was shining and the brisk early winter temperature had brought a bloom to Amanda's cheeks. She pushed down the hood of her coat, once again breathing a sigh of relief over the news she'd gotten from Francine late last night. Francine had been able to get Augie to loosen his grip on the bogus message he'd intercepted. The information peddler cum mud wrestling entrepreneur had taken the loss of future income pretty well, considering. In fact, Francine informed her, he'd gotten a good chuckle out of Amanda's quandary. Amanda counted it a small price to pay for keeping Lee in the dark concerning the whole "stork drop" as Francine was now calling it. In fact, she'd already set into motion plans for a quiet dinner with Scarecrow that evening, at which point she would break the news that they were expecting. Hopefully she could then put this entire mishap behind her forever.

Amanda smiled pleasantly at Mrs. Marsten, supplying her with the correct password for the day: Bumbershoot. Mrs. Marsten's broad grin gave Amanda pause, and she turned back and looked at the woman with misgiving. Normally, while kind, Mrs. Marsten was not the type to be overly demonstrative...tight-lipped and stern were the two words that Amanda always thought of when the older woman came to mind. Today, however, she seemed downright jovial. A strange feeling began to inch its way up Amanda's spine, but she shook it off and turned to head up the steps to the Q-bureau.

"Mrs. Stetson," Mrs. Marsten's voice stopped her in mid-step. "I just wanted to tell you congratulations."

Amanda slowly turned, looking down at the woman who was gazing up at her from the reception desk. A large lump formed in her throat. She knew the answer to the question before she asked it. "Congratulations on what, Mrs. Marsten?" she asked, her voice a barely audible whisper.

"Why on the baby, of course" The older woman smiled warmly. "You and Mr. Stetson must be thrilled."

"Thrilled?" Amanda croaked. "Yes, thrilled. Ah, Mrs. Marsten, can I ask you how you heard about... the news." Amanda tried to keep her tone normal, but her voice still held a slightly strangled quality.

"Oh, Leatherneck told me."

Amanda's heart lurched and then dropped like a lead sinker to the pit of her stomach. Leatherneck? "Thank you, Mrs. Marsten," she managed to squeak out, dashing up the steps.

Her brain was in a flurry as she strode down the hall towards the Q-bureau. Trembling fingers unlocked the door and pushed it open. Leatherneck? How in the devil did he find out about the baby? And if he knows, and Mrs. Marsten knows... "Who else might know?"

Amanda hadn't realized she'd asked the question aloud until Francine answered her. "Oh, I'd say just about everyone on the eastern seaboard."

Amanda looked over at the blonde, who was sitting on the love seat, her legs crossed, holding a notepad in one hand, tapping the long red nails of her other hand on the arm rest.

"How?" Amanda fairly screeched.

"As best we can figure, Augie ran into Lana, at a party at the Bulgarian embassy, who then told Rhonda who then spoke with Katrina as she was filling up her Volvo, who in turn mentioned it to Harlan when she was picking up some take-out for dinner last night... Geez, these people get around. No wonder Lee calls them his 'family'." Francine ran a manicured finger down her notes. "You know, Amanda, I don't think there's a snitch, a spy, a counterspy, a double agent, or any other sort of intelligence operative in the D.C. metropolitan area that doesn't know your happy little news." She looked pointedly over to Amanda, who was still standing, dazed, in the doorway. "Oh, correction, there is ONE person who doesn't know."

"Thank you, Francine," Amanda hissed.

"When DO you plan to let Lee in on this not-so-secret secret of yours?" Francine asked, ignoring the daggers shooting at her from Amanda's gaze.

"This evening, after he gets back from Williamsburg," Amanda muttered, walking over to her desk and plopping into the chair.

"Well, you'd better try to catch him as soon as he gets back for our late meeting with Billy. Because, as of right now, your news, and the fact that the great Scarecrow is quite probably the only person in the intelligence community that's in the dark about it, is the subject of quite a few coffee break and water cooler jokes."

"Oh, no," Amanda sighed in dismay. Just when she thought she was getting things back under control, they kept getting worse. "Everyone here knows, too?"

"Please, Amanda, the woman in the Deli department of the Georgetown 'social' Safeway asked me if you'd picked a name yet and the guys in the accounting department have a pool going on your delivery date," Francine spouted, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, my gosh." Amanda's head dropped to the desk. *Thud*. She picked her head up slightly and let it drop again. *Thud*. "Lee's going to be the last person to find out I'm pregnant...this is just awful."

"Yes." Francine drew out the word, smiling. "He's going to take some terrible ribbing over this one."

*Thud-Thud-Thud...*

## **Part 5**

Lee pulled his 'vette into his assigned space in the parking garage. He flashed on the locks and alarm and gave the car a tender pat on the fender before heading over to the guard desk near the elevator doors.

"Hey, Sam, how's it going?" he asked the uniformed guard pleasantly, signing in.

"Just fine, Mr. Stetson, and you?" The young man smiled at him from behind the metal desk.

"Great, Sam, glad to be back." Stetson walked towards the elevator and it opened as if on cue. Just as the doors began to close he saw Sam stand up and wave at him.

"Oh, congrats, Mr. Stetson," the guard shouted out, just as the elevator doors closed in the face of the bewildered Scarecrow.

Strange, Lee thought. Wonder what that was about? He thought for a moment. *Oh, I must have won the accounting department's football pool*. A cocky, self-assured and slightly smug grin lit his features. He made a mental note to go and pick up his winnings before he left for the day.

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Lee checked his watch and picked up speed as he headed down the hall towards the bullpen. He was twenty minutes late for the staff meeting in Billy's office and he didn't want his head handed to him on a platter. Billy hated for anyone to be tardy, promptness being a major pet peeve of the Field Unit Director.

Scarecrow eased through the conference room door and quickly took the only chair available at the table, across from Amanda. He glanced at her as he took his seat, giving her a small wink and a smile. She returned his greeting with a nervous twitch of her lips and then looked down to pick a something on the sweater she was wearing. The smile ran from Scarecrow's face as he recognized she was obviously ill at ease over something. He caught Billy shooting him an annoyed look and he pulled a small notebook and pen from his suit jacket and tried to focus on the briefing. He scribbled some quick notes, trying to play catch-up on what he'd already missed.

A muffled chuckle and a snort from the far end of the table caught his attention. He looked up to see Feldman and Cranston smirking at him. Now what the hell is up with those two? Francine, who was sitting next to Phil Cranston, gave him a quick elbow in the ribs and shot him a dirty look.

"So, Scarecrow, do you have an update from Williamsburg?" Billy's voice pulled Lee's attention back to the briefing.

"Ah, yeah, Billy," he started, casting another glance down at Phil, who was trying, albeit not very hard, to hide a broad grin behind his hand. "The, ah, Hansen case is almost tied up," Lee started, giving Cranston a dirty look of his own. "We think we've located the leak. I briefed the security team and..." he paused, eyes and ears scanning the room slowly. From the numerous smirks, muted snickers, and cocky grins that graced the faces of the other meeting participants, Scarecrow knew that there was definitely something going on that he was not privy to. And he didn't like it. He looked back at Amanda, who was now studiously investigating one of her fingernails. She seemed utterly fascinated and engrossed in the inspection and would not meet his gaze.

"People, please." Billy shushed the room. "You were saying, Scarecrow?" He tried to hide his own amusement but failed miserably.

Lee raised an eyebrow at his boss, his eyes flashing his annoyance at what appeared to be a joke that everyone was in on but him. "We're expecting to make a bust within the week."

"What else are you 'expecting', Scarecrow?" Adam Harrison piped up from his perch on the other side of Francine. The question was met with numerous giggles and tittering and one sharp elbow to the ribs, once again delivered by Francine.

Lee scowled, his face turning an interesting shade of red. He glanced at Amanda to find that she'd left off her inspection of her manicure and was now disassembling her ballpoint pen.

"Well, thank you, Scarecrow, for that update." Billy broke through the chatter and Lee's obvious annoyance. "That about does it, people. Adam and Frank, check with Francine on the details of the Kerchevski list. Ann, if you have a moment, I need to talk with you. Meet me in my office in a few moments?"

It was well after five o'clock and the agents didn't waste a moment to find their way out of the conference and back to their individual offices and then home. Scarecrow stuffed his notepad and pen back into his jacket pocket and quickly skirted around Billy in the doorway to catch up to Amanda in the hallway.

"What is going on, Amanda?" He grabbed her elbow and slowed her pace.

"What's going on?" Amanda slowed to a jog, her husband retaining his grip on her arm.

Lee's eyes narrowed. "You heard me. What was that all about?" He motioned back in the general direction of the conference room.

"What was what all about?" Amanda shrugged, trying in vain to disengage herself from her husband's grasp.

"Um hm, just as I figured. You know what's going on. Spill it." They came to an abrupt halt in front of the elevators.

"Spill what?" Amanda asked, pushing at the elevator button for the fourth time. "I don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart."

"Like hell you don't!" Lee bristled. "Don't try to pull that coy act on me. Something is going on here," he glanced around, catching the curious glances and smiles those around them. "You won't even look me in the eye, and you keep repeating every question I ask you. I know what that means, Mrs. Stetson."

"It means you're being silly, Lee." She rolled her eyes. "Everyone is just a little punchy... that's all. It's been a long day and an even longer meeting... most of which you missed."

"Don't change the subject," he stated flatly.

"I'm not changing the subject. Why would you even say that? So, how was Williamsburg?"

Lee narrowed his eyes at her again. "Amanda..." he started, the warning signs of his impending loss of temper quite clear. Just then the elevator dinged its arrival.

Amanda swung around and looked her husband square in the eye. "Look, please, Lee, just get on this elevator with me and come up to the Q-Bureau. I promise I will explain everything when we're there. Just not here, okay?" Her eyes pleaded with him. *Okay, so I won't be able to break the news to him over a romantic dinner and a bottle of sparkling cider... at least he won't learn he's going to be a father in the middle of an IFF corridor with all our co-workers gawking at us.*

Lee frowned, then sighed and nodded his head in agreement. As the elevator doors opened, they were greeted with a puff of cigarette smoke and the steely gaze of Dr. Smyth.

"Late night, kiddies?" Smyth smiled from behind the cloud of smoke, an ebony cigarette holder clenched between his teeth.

"Tsk, ts, Scarecrow, don't you know that expectant mothers need their rest?"

"What?" Lee glared at the old man. He wasn't in the mood for jokes.

Amanda sagged against the wall, realizing that all hope was now lost. She scrunched her eyes closed, pinched the bridge of her nose, and tried not to listen to what was going to happen next. *Become one with the wall, Amanda, you can do it.*

"I'd say it's about time to take Mother Goose here home for a prenatal nap." Smyth smiled wickedly at the bewildered agent.

Scarecrow's mouth slowly dropped open as the implication of Dr. Smyth's verbal diatribe sank in. Slowly his gaze shifted from the lanky man's smirking face to his wife's beleaguered form. She looked like she was trying to fade into the wall.

Amanda peeked out over her fingertips; brown and hazel eyes connected. An eternity of silence passed as the two watched each other. Finally, Amanda, not knowing what else to do, smiled weakly at her husband.

"Surprise?" she offered up feebly.

"Oh, my gosh," Lee whispered.

## Part 6

The fire crackled and spit as Lee tossed a handful of small pinecones into the hearth. The glow from the fire and the sweet smell of the pine infused the room with a feeling of warmth and comfort that had little to do with temperature. One foot resting on the ledge of the hearth, he leaned over and prodded at the logs with the brass poker until he was satisfied that the fire would play out for a while longer. Reaching up to the mantle, he found his champagne glass, swirling the amber contents before taking a tentative sip.

"Can I get you some more cider?" he asked, looking over at his wife, who was stretched out on the sofa, a handmade and obviously much-loved afghan snuggled over her lower legs and feet.

Amanda peered into her empty glass, then placed it on the coffee table. "No, thanks," she smiled at her husband. The warmth of the fire had given his complexion a ruddy glow and the firelight glinted off his soft brown hair in a most appealing fashion. Once again she marveled at how stunningly handsome he was. The stone-washed jeans he wore were tattered and worn in all the right spots; a tiny tear of frayed denim near the fly catching her attention. Her eyes found the permanent impression in the back left pocket, visible even though the wallet that lived there had been discarded on his bureau drawer hours before. He'd rolled up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, leaving bare his forearms – the sight of which caused a shiver to mark its way down Amanda's spine. She watched the play of his muscles as he coaxed the fire to his bidding. She pulled her knees up, leaning in to wrap her arms around and laying her chin atop them to gaze at the man she loved.

She tried a bit of fire-coaxing herself. "Hey, I'm getting lonely over here."

Lee turned his warm, hazel eyes to her, a flash of dimples and a raised brow telling her that there was already a flame there, just waiting to be fanned. He dropped to kneel on the floor before her, leaning against the sofa and looping his right arm around her knees. He leaned in, grazing her lips with his.

"This better?" he murmured against her parted lips.

"Um hmmm." She reached behind his neck to pull him closer, the kiss deepening as her fingers trailed through his soft hair. She smiled against his lips. "You taste like apples," she chuckled.

He pulled back, his left hand softly stroking her cheek. "So do you," he smiled.

"You know, you don't have to give up alcohol just because I can't drink."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. I think it's a small concession to make considering all the changes you're going to have to go through."

"That's very sweet," she smiled. She reached up to brush back a lock of hair that had fallen onto his forehead, then thought better of it and mussed his hair even more. He gave her a lopsided grin and her heart leapt in her chest. He looked so young; his tousled hair falling into his face, his hazel eyes twinkling, and his dimples playing hide and seek in the smoothness of his cheeks. It was hard, looking at him like this, to see the man who had held her life in his hands so many times. A man who, at a moment's notice, could come out with gun blazing or fists churning to protect her country, her family... her life. Now it would be his family he was protecting.

Not that he hadn't taken the boys to his heart when they'd married. But they were practically young men now... no longer small children. The life she was carrying within her body would be Lee's first chance to experience and explore all the aspects of being a father from the very beginning. As much as she was apprehensive about the changes this baby would bring to their lives, she also relished the chance to give him this gift. She knew what a good father he would be and how wonderful it would be to share this experience with him. She wanted to look down into the face of a child they had created together; wanted to see the little child in Lee play itself out in a new life. She hadn't realized exactly how much she wanted

that until this very moment.

Lee watched the flicker of emotions play out in Amanda's eyes. 'Scared?' he asked tentatively.

She ran a finger, feather-light, across his lips. "Nope. Maybe a bit anxious," she admitted, focusing on the texture of his lips and the sweet smell of his breath, warm on her face.

"Me too," he whispered. "It's like I can't wait and yet I want to slow it down and savor every moment of it. I just can't believe it." He shook his head. "I'm going to be a father." A strange feeling fluttered up from the depths of his stomach and circled his heart. A father. His agency experience had prepared him for just about anything...except this. The small seed of fear and uncertainty that had been planted with the news of Amanda's pregnancy had quickly been extinguished by the warmth of Amanda's hand in his. He knew, in his heart, that with her, all things were possible. Even the evolution of the aloof Scarecrow into the role of husband, and now, parent. He knew it had already begun with her boys and would now continue with this new life they'd created together. Together they would find a way... they always did.

"Yes, you sure are," Amanda interrupted his thoughts, her voice husky in her throat as she witnessed the wistful look on his face.

"We have to tell your mother...and the boys," Lee blurted out suddenly, the thought just occurring to him. "Boy, what a surprise they have when they get back from the scouting trip." A shadow crossed his face and he gave her a wary look and raised an eyebrow. "Wait... they don't already know, do they?"

"No," she huffed, "they don't. So how was Williamsburg?"

Lee leveled a look at her, narrowing his eyes. "Nice try, partner. So, are you ever going to tell me the entire story of what happened back at the agency? Exactly how many people think I'm a perfect idiot because I was the only one who didn't know you were expecting?"

Amanda leaned in to place a tender kiss on his nose and smiled. "Well, do you want me count only those people we work with or the intelligence community at large? And... what is your definition of the word 'perfect'?"

## Part 7

Amanda pressed her cheek to the cool porcelain, desperately willing the rising nausea to abate and give her some rest. She'd experienced her share of morning sickness while she was carrying both of the boys, but this...this was simply torture. Morning, afternoon, evening; there seemed to be no predictable time it came upon her. She'd be fine and then WHAM, she'd find herself racing to the bathroom to, as Phillip so eloquently put it this morning, 'toss her cookies'.

"Amanda?" Lee's voice drifted in to her from their bedroom. "Amanda? What..." he pushed the bathroom door open and went to help her up from the floor. "You still feeling sick?"

She nodded, shaking off his helping hands. She turned to the sink, picking up her toothbrush.

"Sweetheart, this is starting to worry me." Lee looked at her, the concern showing in his eyes. "You've lost weight and it can't be right that you're this sick all the time."

"It's not all the time, Lee," she sighed. "And it's not unusual to lose weight in the first few months of pregnancy."

Lee remained unconvinced by her explanation. "I want you to call the doctor, Amanda."

"Lee..." she started, pausing from scrubbing her teeth, a trickle of toothpaste in the corner of her mouth.

"No, no, you promise me." He pointed his finger and his best 'don't mess with me' look at her. At her look he decided to switch tactics. "Do it for me? Chalk it up to being a nervous new father-to-be? Please?"

She rinsed and spit, then turned to look into her husband's worried eyes. "Okay. Okay. I'll call her today. I promise. I have to set up my next appointment anyway." Amanda leaned in to kiss him, but just as their lips were about to meet another wave of nausea intervened and she scrunched her eyes shut and turned her face away from his. Pushing a finger into the middle of his chest she backed him out of the bathroom, slamming the door shut in his face.

"Amanda," he called through the door. "Let me help you. I feel terrible that you have to be going through this. I want to be there for you... share in this."

Sitting on the floor next to the toilet Amanda looked up at the door separating them. "Lee," she sighed tiredly. "In a matter of months you're going to share with me weight gain, mood swings, swollen ankles, varicose veins, stretch marks, and watching something the size of a small watermelon emerge from my body through an opening the size of a lemon. I'd really like there to be some things we don't share...some little bodily functions that are just all mine. Puking my guts out, I think, is one of those things."

Lee's eyes had widened to the size of saucers during her litany. "Well, if you put it that way," he responded sheepishly.

"Really," Amanda rested her head in her hands. "There's nothing you can do. Go on ahead to work. I'll meet you there later."

"Okay." He gave in reluctantly. He kissed the fingers of his right hand and then patted his side of the door with them. "I love you, Amanda," he said with a small, hopeful smile.

"Yeah. I know," came her monotone reply.

The smile slowly trickled away from his face.

## **Part 8**

"Amanda, you've been through this before. Twice. You know that morning sickness is, for some women, inevitable." Dr. Brice looked again at Amanda's chart, then glanced back her patient, who was sitting in a chair next to her desk.

"I know, Penny, it just seems different this time. It comes and goes at the oddest times. With Phillip and Jamie, at least I knew that once I got up, had a bite to eat and got moving, it would be gone. Now it just comes on me at the weirdest times. I'll be fine and then suddenly the nausea hits me."

Penny shook her head. "I don't know what to tell you, Amanda. You're older now, maybe..." the intercom interrupted her train of thought. She answered the phone. "Yes, Ann? Oh, okay, wait a second," she placed her hand over the phone and looked at Amanda. "Lee's here, do you want Ann to send him in?"

Amanda smiled. "Yeah." Lee had said he wanted to attend this appointment with her but had been running late with a report he had to get on Billy's desk by noon. She was happy he'd made it, hoping that Penny's reassurances that this was simply a strange case of "morning sickness" would ease his over-active imagination.

"Send him in, Ann." She hung up the phone and smiled at Amanda. "How's Lee doing with all this?"

Amanda waved her off with a hand. "Don't ask... next thing you know he's gonna be convinced I have Dengue Fever."

A second later the door opened and Lee's head popped in. "Okay if I come in?" he questioned the two women.

"Yes, Lee, come on in." Penny smiled at her favorite expectant father.

Lee walked over, pulling a chair up next to Amanda's. Leaning in he gave her a quick kiss on the lips and nuzzled her cheek briefly before taking a seat.

"Amanda and I were just discussing the problem she's having with morning sickness and I wanted to reassure you..." Penny broke off as she glanced from Lee to Amanda, noticing her pale complexion. "Amanda, are you okay?"

"Ah..." Amanda closed her eyes and took a breath. "I'm not feeling so good," she whispered as she felt the familiar rush of nausea sweep across her stomach.

"Yes, I can see that," Penny looked at her with concern. "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

"Yes, I think so," Amanda shot out of her chair, heading for the private bathroom in the doctor's office.

Lee's eyes followed his wife with uneasiness, then looked back at Dr. Brice. "See, this is what happens. She seems fine and then it just hits her."

"Lee," Penny asked, "how often does this happen?"

"Seems to me all the time, but Amanda will argue with you on that. I just know that to me she always seems to be running to bathroom to be sick."

"Hmmm." Dr. Brice bit her lip in concentration. Slowly an idea, more of a memory, trickled through her brain. She raised an eyebrow, narrowing her eyes with the sudden thought. She reached for a pile of papers and journals that were stacked haphazardly on the corner of her desk. Rummaging through them for a moment, she pulled out a journal and began thumbing through it.

Amanda emerged from the bathroom, a tissue in her hands, looking decidedly less ill than she had before entering.

"Amanda," Penny questioned without raising her eyes from her search of the journal. "Lee tells me you're sick all the time."

"No," she huffed, looking at her husband. "I'm not, Lee, I've told you that. He just thinks that because whenever he's around I usually am sick."

As the words left her mouth Amanda felt another wave of nausea hit her. She glanced at Lee and then her friend, realizing in the pit of her stomach that she was about to hear something she didn't want to hear.

Penny met her gaze and their eyes locked. "I found it." She gestured to the journal. "An article in the newest issue of The Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology. It's a case study on a rather interesting, although rare, phenomenon concerning pregnancy, morning sickness and... allergies."

"Allergies," Amanda murmured, swallowing in her attempt to keep the remaining contents of her stomach in place.

"Yes," Penny said, her eyes sliding from Amanda over to Lee. "It seems that in very rare cases, the hormones released during the first trimester of pregnancy can bring on allergic reactions. Some of the time, most of the time, the allergies are food related. But not always."

"Not always," Lee echoed.

"No. Sometimes they seem to be centered on pheromones... those are odorless chemicals secreted by the body. It's long been felt that pheromones play an integral part in sexual attraction. In this study they looked at women who appeared to be suffering an allergic reaction, exhibited by nausea that mimicked morning sickness.

Lee shook his head. "I don't understand. What are you saying."

"Well, my best guess is that Amanda might be allergic..." she smiled sheepishly at Amanda and then stared pointedly at Lee, "... to you."

## Part 9

The light was taking forever to change. The seconds ticked by in slow motion as the strained silence in the car insidiously circled the two agents. Lee, in the passenger seat of the Wagoneer, sullenly stared out of his window, the fog and early morning drizzle accurately reflecting his glum mood.

Amanda tapped her finger on the steering wheel, keeping time with the Led Zeppelin song turned down low on the car stereo. The light finally changed, however, the turn lane she was in moved like molasses in January and she found herself having to sit through yet another cycle of the light. Another five minutes of discordant silence was too much to bear.

She glanced over at her husband. "You know, it could be worse. I could have really had Dengue Fever," Amanda chuckled. Hard green eyes slid slowly over to her and caught her. She offered him an apologetic smile, but his eyes refused to thaw. The light changed and she returned her gaze to the road. "Sorry, just trying to look on the light side of this."

"Amanda," Lee grunted, his eyes still boring into his wife's profile, "there is no 'light' side to my wife's being allergic to me." He managed to emphasize every word, making his disgust with the whole situation painfully clear.

"You know, you act as if I'm doing this on purpose. Do you think I like being allergic to you?" She shot him quick looks as she dodged in and out of the tight Georgetown traffic.

Lee sighed, turning his head to once again study the wet streets and congested traffic. Slowly his hand moved to her knee and he gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. Penny said..."

"Penny said she wasn't even sure that you're what I'm allergic to. Until we find out what it is, we just have to be patient." Amanda pulled the car into the Agency garage, parking in her assigned spot by the security desk and elevator.

"I'm running out of patience, Amanda. This is so damned frustrating. I knew when you got pregnant that it would change both of our lives. But not being able to be in the same room with my wife for more than five minutes without her vomiting isn't exactly what I expected."

"Yeah, well, it's no fun for me, either. But at least we found a way to be together... well... in the same room, anyway."

Lee reached up and ran a finger along the surgical mask covering Amanda's face. "Amanda, I can't even kiss you. I can't... we can't..."

"I know." She caught his finger and kissed it, the soft cotton material separating their flesh, but allowing them a small amount of intimacy. "I miss you... that... too. You know we could..."

"No. No way." He pulled his hand free of hers. "I refuse to make love to my wife while she looks like

Marcus Welby. Besides, you know that mask only helps so much.” He frowned, then leaned his head back against the seat and looking at her longingly. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to hang on and make it through this. We’re also going to keep checking other possibilities.”

“Well, so far we’ve ruled out my aftershave, deodorant, cologne, shampoo, toothpaste, mouthwash, and breath mints.” He ticked the list off on his fingers.

“I know... well, we’ll just keep checking. I just can’t believe I’m allergic to you. To you? Please. No woman in her right mind would be allergic to you.” She smiled, hoping that even through the mask he could see the love she held in her heart for him.

“Yeah, well, it would be just my luck to fall in love with the one woman who is,” he smiled ruefully.

She removed the key from the ignition, glancing back at Lee, trying to gauge his mood. She didn’t want him walking into the staff meeting this morning so frustrated over this situation that he took it out on everyone around him.

“Lee...” she started, but he cut her off.

“Don’t. It’s okay. I’m okay.” He smiled at her, his eyes warm and accepting. “Really. Now, we’d better get to work. I’m late for one more meeting and Billy is going to personally write out my pink slip.”

“Oh, Billy would never fire you for being late for meetings. Assign you as Dr. Pain’s personal punching bag, maybe. But fire you?”

Nahhhhh.” She grinned over at her husband.

“Gee, thanks,” he grunted. He tried to hide a smile as an idea flitted through his mind. “Hey, as long as you have to wear that thing,” he motioned to her mask, “maybe we could decorate it or something.”

“Decorate it? How?”

“How about putting a big zipper on it?” He winked and hopped from the car before she could retort.

She caught up with him at the door, giving his hind end a good swat at they got into the elevator. “A zipper, huh?”

Lee unbuttoned his winter coat, pushing his hands deep into the pockets of his slacks. Rocking back on his heels, he smiled down at his wife. “How about I take you out to lunch today to make up for that... oh, wait.” He quickly fumbled for his calendar in the lining pocket of his suit jacket. “Damn, I have another session with the boys in the chem lab today. How about tomorrow?”

Amanda’s brows drew together, a tiny wrinkle forming between her eyes. “Chem lab?”

“Yeah, you remember. I’m one of the guinea pigs they’re using to help finetune that new antidote to Zap Gas. This new stuff is great, Amanda... lasts about half an hour, doubling the time we’re immune, and it doesn’t have any of the side-effects we had with the older version.”

The doors to the elevator opened and they walked out into the corridor.

“How long have you been part of this trial?” Amanda asked, walking along side her husband as they made their way towards the bullpen and conference room.

“Guess it’s been about two months. It should be over soon. I think they’ve pretty much gotten the results they want.” He stopped at the entryway to the bullpen to motion Amanda through ahead of him, only to find he was alone. Looking back, he found her standing several paces behind, staring at him quizzically.

"A month and a half ago?" she asked as he approached her.

"Yes. Amanda, we're going to be late. I was just kidding about the pink slip, but really, I don't want to get on Billy's bad side today, okay?" He motioned to the conference room and turned to head that way.

"Scarecrow." Amanda's voice caught him and halted his steps. He looked back. She slowly removed her mask and smiled at him.

"You know, for two world class spies we're pretty dense."

"Speak for yourself, Mrs. Scarecrow," he shot back. "Amanda, what are you talking about... and you'd better put that thing back on." He motioned to the mask that was now bunched up in her hand.

She shoved the offending object into her pocket. "Nope, don't think I'll have to. Who else is in this trial with you?"

"What?" He ran a hand through his hair. "A handful of other agents. I don't know all of them."

"Who, Scarecrow? What other agents?" she prompted him.

"Dickenson. Alberts. Randel..."

To his dismay, Amanda spun on her heels and headed back down the corridor towards the elevator. He shot a look at the conference room door and then back towards Amanda's departing form. Shrugging and heaving a heavy sigh, he turned to follow his wife.

He stayed a few feet behind her, not willing to risk the tides of nausea that usually swept over her if he got any closer when she wasn't wearing the mask. "Amanda, where are you... we... going?"

"You'll see," she offered him over her shoulder. She rounded the next corner and stopped by a closed office door.

"Randel's office?" Lee asked, looking at the nameplate on the door. "Amanda, why—"

"Wait," she cut him off, briskly knocking on the door.

"Come," a voice within the office sounded.

Amanda opened the door and walked into the office. Lee followed her, keeping the safety zone between them.

"Dan." Amanda smiled at the agent seated behind the desk, a stack of file folders and computer printouts decorating the old wooden surface.

Agent Randel stood, smiling. "Amanda... Lee... good morning."

"Good morning." Amanda smiled at the dark-haired man.

"Morning, Dan," Lee piped in.

"Dan," Amanda started. "I was wondering if you could help us out?"

"Ah, sure, be happy to," the agent offered uncertainly.

"You're in that chem lab trial for the new Zap Gas antidote along with Lee, aren't you?" Amanda asked, taking one step toward the desk.

"Sure am." The dark-haired agent smiled and nodded.

Amanda took another step and stopped. "Good... would you mind hugging me?"

A frown wrinkled the brow of the agent. "Ah, you want me to hug you?" He looked with confusion from Amanda and then, slowly, to Lee. Scarecrow's look seemed to mirror his own confusion, although he didn't seem that upset by his wife's rather unorthodox request.

"Yes, I'd like you to get close to me," Amanda stated, taking another step.

"Close... to... you?" Agent Randel's voice squeaked uncomfortably and he once again looked back at Lee. It seemed he now had Scarecrow's full interest.

"Yes," Amanda smiled, taking one more step to come up against the front of his desk.

"Ah, Dan..." Lee growled from low in his chest.

Agent Randel's eyes shot back to Scarecrow, irritation now readable in their hazel depths.

"No, Lee, it's okay." Amanda interrupted, leaning over the desk to face the dark-haired agent, although her words were for her husband. "I think you're going to find this interesting."

Agent Randel inserted a finger into the collar of his shirt, as it suddenly appeared to be strangling him for no apparent reason. He'd always found Amanda very attractive. Most of the men at the agency did. However, early on he'd come face to face with the fact that Scarecrow was not only her partner, but her protector as well. It was an unspoken rule that she was off limits as date material... even before the two had become romantically involved. Now he was her husband. A fact that, combined with Mrs. Stetson's current request and questionable actions, was causing his heart to pound like a jackhammer in his chest. He tried to remember if he was carrying his gun.

"Dan," Amanda purred, circling the desk slowly, approaching the nervous agent.

He backed away from her advance. "Ah, Amanda... ah... Mrs. Stetson... I don't think this is such a good idea." He looked over to her husband for some direction and found the man observing the situation with a calm but determined look. He wondered if Lee was carrying his gun.

"Really," Amanda said, "this will only take a... second." On the last word she leapt forward, wrapping her arms around the startled agent. She held on tight and buried her face into the front of his shirt, taking a deep breath.

"Oh, my god," Agent Randel yelled, trying desperately to disentangle himself from the wife of the man that was now gazing at them both through slightly narrowed eyes.

Before he could pry himself free, Amanda lurched back, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. She backed slowly away from the now trembling Randel, her other hand clutching her stomach. She stopped as her back ran into Lee's chest.

"You feel sick?" Lee asked over her shoulder in an easy tone, never taking his eyes off of Randel.

She nodded vehemently and turned to race from the room.

Lee watched his wife sprint from the room, then turned his attention back to the other agent.

Dan eased back as Lee approached him. The back wall of his office not so gently stopped him and he was just about to raise his hands in defense when Lee grabbed one of them, pumping it enthusiastically. "Thanks, Dan, thanks a lot."

After a moment had passed and he realized that Scarecrow wasn't going to do him any bodily injury, his curiosity got the better of him. In a weak voice he asked, "For what?"

Lee smiled a toothy grin. "For turning my wife's stomach. Thanks!" With that, he straightened the dark-haired man's tie, gave his lapel a quick pat, and left the office in search of Amanda.

## Part 10

At the slight movement of the bed beneath him, Lee Stetson looked over at his wife. She was stretched out beside him, the covers tucked securely about her, the book she was reading propped against the mound of her stomach. Lee smiled at the vision before him. Her hair was down, tumbling about her shoulders in a tousled, but oh-so-appealing manner. The sleeves of her white cotton nightgown were pushed up to her elbows, the gathered neckline allowing him more than a tiny peek of cleavage. He raised an eyebrow and grinned in appreciation of the plump mounds of creamy flesh the gown exposed. It was certainly interesting to see Amanda in this more voluptuous phase of her pregnancy.

She was so intent on her reading, her mouth forming a slight "o" and a raised eyebrow showing her keen interest in the material, that she didn't notice his appreciative glance. He placed the magazine he was reading beside him and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

"What?" she started, turning her face to his.

Lee captured her lips with his, deepening the kiss. Pulling away a bit, he smiled against her lips. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

She smiled back. "Oh, I don't want you to ever resist the urge to kiss me."

"So," he leaned back into his pillow, which was propped against the bookcase headboard of their king-size bed, "what are you reading that has you so engrossed?" He reached over to tip up the front cover the book that she had laid across her knees. "Great Expectations? I take it this isn't Dickens?" he finished, picking up the book to thumb through it.

"No," she laughed, the sound tinkling in his ears and in his heart. "Mrs. Marsten recommended it to me. Supposedly it's the hottest new book on pregnancy and childbirth. It really is fascinating, Lee, you ought to read it."

Lee looked at her from the corner of his eye, still perusing the book. "Amanda, what do YOU need with a book like this? You've already been through this twice... I'd say you were the expert, not this... guy?... a man wrote this?" his tone was cynical as he placed the book back on her lap.

"Well, thanks for the compliment, big guy," she grinned at him. "But remember, it's been a long time since I was pregnant. Things have changed."

"Amanda," Lee sighed. "How much can something like pregnancy and childbirth change?"

She raised an eyebrow at her skeptical husband. "You'd be surprised. When I had Phillip and Jamie, Joe wasn't even encouraged to be in the delivery room with me. And there's just tons of new information on prenatal exercise, nutrition, vitamins, childbirth options. Say, do you know that they now believe that the baby can actually hear things that are going outside the womb and that some experts encourage you to play music or talk to the fetus to help its development?"

"Would that be Led Zeppelin or The Grateful Dead?" Lee smirked.

"Very funny," Amanda huffed, picking her book back up. She glanced over at her husband, who had also picked up his magazine. "You know, you really should start reading some of the material that Penny has given us. We're going to be starting Lamaze in a few weeks."

"Hey." He looked over at her. "When have you ever seen me unprepared? I've got this whole 'coach' thing totally under control, Amanda, trust me. I've got my background information, done some independent research, and I've talked to some of the guys at work that have been through this... seems like a piece of cake." He shrugged, putting his nose back into his reading material.

"Piece of cake, huh, Scarecrow?" She smiled, raising an eyebrow. "You know, giving birth isn't like a stake-out or passing along some secret micro-dot."

"Amanda, please, I've been an undercover intelligence operative for close to 15 years. I think, given the breadth of my experience, I can handle something as normal and natural as the birth of a baby," he snorted, focusing again on the article about vintage Porsche's.

Amanda resisted the urge to laugh outright. Poor Scarecrow, should she warn him? *Nahhhh...*

## Part 11

Amanda surveyed the crowded room. The Lamaze class would be starting soon and a dozen or so couples were beginning to make themselves comfortable on the mats that covered the room's hardwood floor. Damn. He's going to be late. I just knew it.

She clutched the pillow she was carrying to her chest and looked once again towards the door, hoping to catch sight of her husband. A wrinkle creased her brow as she frowned and looked about her at all the other expectant parents. All the good spots were being staked out. There was no way she'd even be able to get down to the floor without Lee's help. She scowled once again.

"Excuse me." A hand on her shoulder and a deep voice in her ear brought her out of her thoughts of how best to torture Scarecrow when she caught up with him later that evening.

She turned to find herself looking into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. A smile she couldn't quite seem to control formed on her lips. She tugged at the over-sized sweatshirt she wore and wondered vaguely if she had remembered to brush her hair before leaving for the class.

"Look, I hope I'm not being too forward, but my wife and I noticed you don't have a partner for the class."

He was tall; even taller than Lee, Amanda speculated, looking up into his startling blue eyes. His dark hair and finely chiseled features put him in what Dotty would have called the "drop dead good looking" category. "Oh, ah, yes." Amanda stumbled over her words, still unable to wipe off the silly grin she knew adorned her face. "I mean, no... I have a partner. I have a husband. He's just not here... yet... ah... he seems to be running late."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that. It happens. He grinned, devastating dimples peeking out from his cheeks.

"Sandra and I... well, if you want, you can join us. We've been through this three times already, so we're old hands. If you need a hand, just until your husband gets here, we'd be happy to help out. "

"Oh, that's so kind of you--" Amanda swallowed, looking around the room uncertainly.

"Ted," he offered along with his hand.

Amanda clutched her pillow in one arm, extending her hand and watching in a daze as it disappeared into his larger one.

"Amanda King... ah... Stetson," she replied, flustered.

"This is Sandra, my wife." Ted gestured to the floor where an attractive blond woman was sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"Hi, Amanda... come on down and join us." The blond smiled and pointed to the empty spot on the mat

next to them. "I'm sure your husband will be along shortly."

"I'm sure he will," Amanda smiled nervously. "If he knows what's good for him," she muttered under her breath. She took Ted's hand and allowed him to help her into a sitting position on the mat.

"Is this your first?" Sandra asked.

"Oh, gosh, no... my third actually. But it's been a while... and it's my husband's first child," Amanda supplied, feeling rather strange offering up this information to total strangers.

"Number four for us," Sandra sighed, taking Ted's hand in hers. "Did you go through natural childbirth with your other children?"

"No, I didn't, and I have to say the thought of it is a little overwhelming," Amanda admitted.

"Oh, you'll be fine," Sandra reassured her. "The classes are great, they really help prepare you."

Amanda glanced around at the other couples, not totally convinced. She'd had anesthesia with both Phillip and Jamie and she wasn't relishing the idea of what she'd face with 'natural' childbirth. But she wanted to give it a try. She felt, somehow, that she had missed out by not being more alert during the births of the boys. She placed her hand on her distended abdomen and made the soft circles that the instructor was now leading them through. She tried to relax her body and her mind, focusing on her breathing. This time around she'd be awake for the birth of her baby, and she'd have Lee there to lean on and share the experience with. She squinted at the wall clock. Seven thirty. *Where the hell was he???*

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Lee Stetson slipped into the classroom with as much stealth as he could manage. He knew Amanda was already going to be ticked at him and he didn't want to add to that by drawing any unwanted attention to himself. Unfortunately, the heavy wooden door had other plans and banged closed behind him with a loud thud. A few pairs of eyes turned towards the commotion of his entrance. He searched for the familiar brown ones he loved, nearly tripping over several people and his own feet at the image his eyes finally landed on.

His wife was sitting on the floor, leaning back into the arms of a man he didn't recognize. Of course, he didn't recognize anyone in the class... but then none of the others had their hands on his wife. His eyes narrowed as he watched their two dark heads bent in concentration. The man's hands overlying Amanda's, trailing circles along the sides and top of her very pregnant stomach. She was breathing deeply and calmly, and the man was murmuring something in her ear.

Lee waited until the current exercise had ended, then walked tentatively over to where Amanda sat. When Amanda and the man had separated, he made his presence known with a small cough.

Amanda looked around, pulling her attention away from the instructor, who was going over the next set of exercises. Her lips set in a frown as she caught his gaze. She purposely looked at her watch and then back at her husband.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed, his eyebrows raised imploringly. He flung his coat along the wall and knelt down beside Amanda, pressing a gentle kiss to her cheek. The scent of an after-shave he would have never worn prickled in his nose and he shot a look at the man who was now supporting the pillow and body of the blond woman next to them.

"By the way, nice entrance, Stetson," Amanda whispered. "The only thing missing was you coming in gun

first."

"I didn't think you'd noticed." He frowned, once again perusing the dark-haired man out of the corner of his eye. Noticing the frosty tone of Amanda's voice, however, he offered up an excuse. "They nailed Bancroft this afternoon... I had to meet with Billy and sit in on the interrogation. Did I miss anything?"

"Not too much," Amanda relented, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. She watched him watch Ted. She snuggled back into his arms and smiled. "The instructor went over the class schedule. We've done some breathing exercises... nothing I can't get you up to speed on."

"Uh huh," Lee grunted, still watching Ted. "So who's the bozo that was with you when I came in?"

Amanda pursed her lips, fighting back a smile. "Oh, that would be Ted," she offered, knowing that little piece of information would never satisfy Scarecrow. His jealousy and protectiveness of her never failed to amuse her. She found it an endearing and highly predictable quality. She settled back into his arms, waiting for the inevitable.

"Oh, Ted, huh?" Lee spoke as if the name left a sour taste in his mouth. "How do you know this guy?"

"Lee," she sighed. "He and his wife, Sandra, offered to help me out... seeing as how my husband was late." She put added emphasis on the last word. "He's very nice."

"Yeah, well... I'd rather he not be so 'very nice' with my wife." Lee glanced down at the top of Amanda's head, giving up his hurt feelings and annoyance in the face of the joy he felt in having her in his arms. "Geez, Amanda, I can't leave you alone for a minute. Even seven months pregnant, you're a man magnet. Guess that will teach me not to be late."

"Yes, I guess it will," she laughed. Looking up into his face, she grinned. "Look, I can't help it if men... all men... find me dangerously attractive." She linked her fingers over her stomach and batted her eyelashes.

"Well, I just want you to focus on one man finding you dangerously attractive. Specifically, the man that got you into this..." he rubbed his hands lovingly over her stomach, "shape."

"Yeah," Amanda sighed, struggling to sit up and turn towards him. "I really want to thank you for that," she smirked, pulling his head down towards hers.

The tender kiss they shared was interrupted by the instructor beginning the next exercise. A large grocery bag was passed around, each couple was instructed to pull out an item, identify it, and explain its use.

The first couple pulled out a pacifier; the second, a package of disposable diapers.

"Oh, this is too easy," Lee murmured, a little disappointed that the class seemed so elementary. He didn't know what he was envisioning or hoping for, but this wasn't it.

The bag rounded the group and shortly landed in Ted and Sharon's hands. They pulled from its depths a bottlebrush, then passed the bag along to Lee and Amanda.

Amanda motioned for Lee to do the honors. Seeing the other items and feeling relatively certain that he'd be pulling out something along the lines of a rattle or teething ring, he gave Amanda a smug look and confidently dug deep within the bag.

His eyes clouded with doubt as he surveyed the strange object he'd withdrawn from the bag. He peered over at Amanda for help, but the look she gave him told him that she was going to leave this in his capable hands.

"Ah, well, this is obviously a... ah..." He turned the item over in his hands, his mind running through a hundred possibilities of how this item might function. It looked vaguely like something he'd once in used

Afghanistan to defuse a bomb, but he was fairly certain it had a more mundane use. He ran his hands over it, tilting it this way and that in his effort to identify it. He looked up at his fellow classmates, smiling weakly, and cleared his throat. Glancing over at Amanda he found her looking up at the ceiling, lightly whistling under her breath. Biting the ego bullet, he sheepishly backed down. "Ah, I have no idea what this thing is."

"Anyone?" the instructor urged.

Ted immediately raised his hand. "It's a breast pump," he offered, smiling over at Lee.

Lee immediately dropped the item back into the bag as though it had burned his hand.

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"You know, you're a crazy person." Amanda couldn't stop her laughter as she sipped the herbal tea that the hospital provided during the break.

"I don't see the humor in any of this," Lee said tightly, stirring his coffee.

"Oh, please, Lee," Amanda sighed, wiping at a tear with a Kleenex she pulled from the pocket of her sweats. "You would have thought that breast pump had bitten you," she chuckled.

"Not funny," he huffed, shooting her a warning look.

"And then you and Ted... competing like two children," she leaned in and whispered to him. "You know, Lamaze breathing should not be a contest. You're not supposed to see who can make his wife hyperventilate first."

"Oh, now you're exaggerating." Lee looked over at her. "Besides, I was not competing with that jerk. He was competing with me."

"Oh, I think both of you were competing to be the most obnoxious." She smiled, moving away from the table and motioning Lee to follow her. They stood in the corner of the room as the other couples milled about, enjoying the break.

"The guy just thinks he knows everything," Lee spat out in exasperation.

"Oh, like someone else I know," Amanda smiled.

"I do not think I know everything." Off her look he piped up again. "I don't!"

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, after my previous experience and watching that movie, I can guarantee you, you don't know everything."

His mind off Ted for a moment, Lee thought back to the childbirth movie the instructor had just finished showing. "Hey, what was with that movie? That thing was frightening."

"They want you prepared, Scarecrow. It's not like on television where you boil water, fold some blankets, grunt and push for a minute or two, and, poof, you have a baby."

"I know that," he sighed. "It just seemed so..." He glanced over at Amanda, not wanting to say the wrong thing and yet feeling like he had to talk with her about this. "... so painful. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

A small smile formed on her lips. "At this point, Scarecrow, I don't think we have much choice."

"I mean natural childbirth. You know that's not our only option."

"Are you having second thoughts?" She looked over at him.

"Who, me? No... no... I just want to make sure this is what you want," he responded immediately, trying to sound as supportive as his nervous system would allow. He reached over, enfolding her hand in his.

"It is... as long as I know you'll be there with me." Amanda watched his profile as he surveyed the classroom. She recognized the tension in his body and tried to gauge the level of his discomfort and fear. She knew he felt overwhelmed by much of this, despite his sometimes cavalier attitude. The two parts of his being were at war over this. Scarecrow didn't want to admit that there was anything he couldn't do... Lee was afraid he wouldn't be what she needed him to be. And in his usual attempts to sidestep anything emotionally difficult, Lee was eager to let Scarecrow handle this situation.

"I will be," Lee's hazel eyes swept back to capture hers. "You couldn't keep me away."

Her body relaxed. The look in his eyes reassured her that no matter what, he'd always be there for her. He'd work through these fears. They both would, together. She'd already known that... in her heart. It was just that, every once in a while, her mind had to hear it, see it in his eyes. "Okay, so no more one-upmanship with Ted then?"

"Hey, I didn't start it..." Lee bristled.

"I don't care who started it," Amanda interrupted, feeling like she was scolding one of the boys.

"Look, I just don't like the guy, okay?" Lee offered weakly.

"Yeah, I know," Amanda sighed. "I also think we can safely say that he feels pretty much the same about you."

"Good," Lee grunted. "A mutual dis-admiration society."

Amanda bit her bottom lip, hesitating on her next words. "Which is not going to be easy, considering..."

Lee's jaw tensed. "Considering what?"

Amanda watched the play of his jaw muscles. She took a deep breath. In for a penny, in for a pound. "That Sandra invited us over to their house for dinner next weekend..."

Lee shot her an incredulous look.

She gave him her best smile. "And, I accepted."

"You what???" he exclaimed, his voice hitting an octave higher than Amanda thought he was capable of.

As she opened her mouth to respond, she found herself being none-too-gently shoved to the side as a rather tall, and obviously bleached, blond threw herself at Lee, giving him a full body bear hug. Since she was at least as pregnant as Amanda was, this was no easy feat and the force of the embrace nearly knocked Scarecrow over.

"Lee Stetson! You hound, you!!" the blond exclaimed in an exaggerated southern drawl. "Oh mah gawd, I don't buh-lieve it!"

"Oh-my-god," Lee echoed back, a look of panic crowding out the annoyance that had been there only seconds before. He would have recognized this woman anywhere. The hair, the voice, the accent, the pink-on-pink velour sweat suit... "Crystal," he croaked.

"Crystal?" Amanda's eyes snapped over to the tall blond, taking an instant assessment. Tall, thin, blue

eyes, big breasts. She narrowed her eyes. The infamous Crystal. She'd had a lengthy discussion with Lee concerning this woman; it had been an integral part of the 'truth or dare' session they'd shared one afternoon in the Q-bureau.

Amanda knew of the multitudes of women that had pranced their way through Lee Stetson's rumpled bedclothes. Most of them she easily dismissed. One-night stands and encounters with Russian tumblers and over-sexed violinist in the line of duty were of no threat to her. Tawdry? Yes. Immature? Yes. Annoying? Yes. But threatening? No. There were a few women, however, that had gotten under Amanda's skin... mostly because she'd known they'd gotten under Scarecrow's. Leslie, Dorothy, and Eva, to name three. However, she'd gotten to know the fine points of his relationship with these women in intimate detail.

Leslie, Amanda knew, had simply been Lee's way of fighting off his growing attraction towards his partner. An Amanda clone that had everything he wanted and, yet, amazingly, wasn't who he wanted at all.

In Eva's case, perhaps Amanda had been acquainted with the details of their history together a bit too intimately. She could still draw up within her mind the look on Lee's face when he had first been reunited with his old love. But what was over was over. Lee had said that himself.

Dorothy perhaps had been the hardest memory for her deal with. She was gone, never to return... taken from Lee before he'd really had the chance to figure out where she fit into his life. Who knows what would have happened if only... but again, it didn't play out that way.

But Crystal... Crystal had been another matter. All the other women that had paraded into Lee's life had paraded out with only a brief notation in his black books to mark the occasion. Except for Crystal. She'd been around long enough to leave behind a little memento. That sleazy, cheap, Pepto Bismol pink robe. She knew it was such a petty thing to dwell on, but that robe had really bothered Amanda. It might have been jammed back in his closet with all the sports coats and suits Lee'd grown tired of, but it had still been there. Sharing his apartment with him. Taking up space in his life. It was still around, balled up in the bottom of a plastic bag full of old clothes that neither of them ever remembered to take to the local shelter. Not that she'd wish that robe on anyone... not even a homeless person. Now she finally had a chance to meet this woman. She of the pink acetate bathrobe and, Amanda was sure, although Lee would never admit to it, the half empty bottle of Jean Nate she'd found dropped behind the sink in his bathroom.

"Crystal," Amanda crooned, plastering a sweet as sugar smile on her face. "So nice to met you!"

Crystal turned and smiled at the brunette. "It is?" she questioned, taking the hand that Amanda offered her.

"Oh, excuse my husband," Amanda laughed, giving Lee a whack in the chest that made him cough and rub his sternum gingerly. "He's never been known for his manners, now has he? I'm Amanda. Amanda Stetson." Not sure of the Bimbo Factor involved, and despite the fact that her name didn't end, as many of Lee's past liaison's had, in an "i" with a big smiley face for a dot, Amanda figured she'd play it safe and spell it out for her a bit more completely. "As in, Lee's wife."

"Oh, really." Crystal's eyes narrowed. "So you're the gal that finally hawg-tied ole Lee."

"Yeeeessssss," Amanda drawled out. "The old hog-tier, that would be me."

Lee grimaced as he watched his old girlfriend and his wife inch closer to one another. It was an eerie image. Both women tall, pregnant, and hormonally driven... it was, he thought, like watching Godzilla and Rodan face off in some old Japanese movie. You know what's going to happen and yet you hope beyond hope that something stops it before any blood is shed or some city is stepped on.

As luck would have it, the instructor began flickering the lights, ending the break and signaling everyone

to take their seats. Godzilla and Rodan paused and Tokyo was saved. Lee let out the breath he didn't even realize he had been holding.

"What a shame," Lee sighed, capturing Amanda with an arm around her shoulders. "Looks like we're going to have cut this short. Back to business."

"Yes," Amanda murmured, "what a shame. But we have six more classes together. I'm sure that we can catch up another time."

"Great," Crystal chimed in, not willing to give Amanda an inch. "You'll have to meet mah husband, Barry. Barry Richards."

"Barry Richards? The center for the Washington Redskins?" Lee gulped.

"Yeeessss," Crystal smiled smugly, then turned on her heel.

"Oh, goody, can't wait. Buh-bye." Amanda chirped, smiling and waving at the departing woman like some sort of deranged airline hostess.

They watched as Crystal moved to the opposite side of the room and snuggled up against a gigantic mountain of a man. The man bent down from his massive height and Crystal, standing on tiptoe, whispered something in his ear and then, smiling, pointed and waved at Lee and Amanda. The man did not smile. He did not wave. He did, however, glare at Lee.

"Oh, that'll be fun, huh, Lee?" Amanda chortled, walking back to their place on the mat. She called back to him over her shoulder. "Remind me to bring her bathrobe in to class next week...I'm sure she'll be happy to have it back."

## **Part 12**

"Lee!!"

His name, shouted from upstairs and in such a dire tone, caused Scarecrow to lurch from the sofa, displacing the Sunday edition of the Washington Post onto the floor and causing his half-filled cup of coffee to slosh onto the front of his t-shirt and jeans.

"Lee!!"

His long legs took the stairs two at a time as he raced towards his wife's voice. "Amanda," he called out, searching first in their bedroom and then making his way down the hall past the boys' rooms and into the nursery. "What's the matter? Are you... "

The sight before him halted his words and brought a loud snort of amusement from him.

"Don't you dare laugh," came a voice from somewhere under a long length of pastel colored wallpaper that drooped precariously off the wall.

He lifted the paper up and found his wife, both hands above her head, leaning into the wall, holding the remainder of the paper in place.

"It won't stay put," she huffed over her shoulder at him.

"Hmmm, just like you," Lee stated, reaching over to pick up the long wallpaper brush and pushing the paper back up the wall, freeing his wife from do-it-yourself hell. When he was sure that the paper was adhering to the wall, he turned to face his wife, hands on his hips. "Amanda, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm doing the job that my husband promised he'd do today." She leveled a look at him.

"I told you I'd do it and I will. I was just reading the paper. It's Sunday, and it's only nine o'clock in the morning..." He paused to look around the room. All the baby furniture was now pushed up against the near wall, and a large, paint-stained drop cloth had been spread about to protect the new pastel yellow carpet from being damaged. "Amanda, what is this?" He gestured to the conglomeration of furniture. "Do you work for Allied Van Lines and you're just not telling me?"

"What do you mean?" She shrugged as nonchalantly as she could.

"Amanda, you're eight and a half months pregnant. You don't need to be pushing furniture around the room. Look, it's not my fault that the paper got back-ordered and didn't come in until now. I told you I'd handle getting it up and I will." He sighed, dropping the long handled wallpaper brush and moving to pick up the smaller one that was sitting on the edge of the glue tray.

"Sometime before this baby goes to college?"

Green eyes narrowed and slowly traveled over to meet hers. He none too gently tossed the brush back into the glue tray. Amanda realized immediately she'd gone a step too far. She knew the paper had just been delivered a few days ago. And she knew that Lee had been putting in a lot of overtime at the Agency the last few weeks, trying to get his cases and paperwork caught up so that he could take some time off when the baby arrived. She also knew she'd just been totally unfair to him.

Walking slowly towards him, Amanda smiled an apology. Lee raised an eyebrow in return to show her it would take more than that simple gesture to make up with him. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. He shook his head, not giving in. She reached around him and pressed herself to his side, her stomach keeping her from getting too close, her arms unable to reach very far around his waist. He looked away from her and up at the ceiling, drawing out a heavy sigh and fighting very hard to keep from smiling. Standing on tiptoe, Amanda leaned in further and inserted her tongue into his ear, at the same time reaching down and gently grabbing his rear end, giving his jean clad butt a firm pinch.

Deciding to accept her apology, Lee caught her in his arms and turned her quickly. He pulled her back firmly up against his chest, snaking his arms around to cradle her swollen abdomen. "Don't be making any promises you can't keep, Mrs. Stetson," he growled in her ear, his lips then dropping to nibble on the soft flesh of her neck.

"Oh, I never make promises I can't keep, Mr. Stetson," she murmured, her hand reaching back behind her to rub against the fly of his jeans.

He immediately released her, stepping back and leaving her hand searching in space for the part of his anatomy that she'd only just been getting a good grip on.

"Ah, Amanda, I was just joking," he choked out, taking another step back as a curious and mildly amused Amanda turned to look at him.

"Joking about wanting to have sex with me?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, no, I would never joke about that. I mean, I might joke, but I... I mean I wouldn't... well... ah..." He stumbled over the words, trailing off as he tried to read her expression.

"So, you're saying you don't want to have sex with me?" Amanda asked, her eyebrow arching a bit further.

"I didn't say that," Lee squeaked out, pointing a finger at her. "Don't put words in my mouth."

Amanda smiled seductively. "Words, Scarecrow, are not what I'm thinking about putting in your mouth."

She walked slowly and deliberately towards him. Reaching out, she ran her hands up his chest, always amazed at how strong and powerful he felt beneath her fingertips. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she turned sideways a bit, allowing their bodies better contact. She looked up into his hazel eyes and smiled. "Don't you want me?" she murmured.

Lee looked down at his wife. The scooped neck t-shirt she was wearing under her maternity overalls gaped a bit and he found himself staring at some rather impressive cleavage. A sheen of perspiration broke out on his upper lip. He let out the breath he was holding and watched as it ruffled through the curls of her bangs. "Amanda," he breathed; again stirring her hair.

"Yes," she whispered, her hands moving to the back of his head, pulling him down to within centimeters of her lips.

Their faces were so close, everything else was blocked from view. Lee looked into the deep brown depths of Amanda's eyes and lost himself as he had a thousand times before. She blinked and his eyes moved to follow the line of her nose, then on to the softness and sweet curves of her lips. She was so incredibly beautiful. Surely no other woman looked this good... smelled this good... tasted this good. His lips found hers as he could no longer deny himself the feel or taste of her. His tongue moved along the velvet of her lips, pushing for entry into the hot, moist, recesses of her mouth. Just as he pressed into her warmth, a jolt hit him in the midsection. Before his mind could wrap itself around what had happened, he felt another sharp thump just below his ribs.

Amanda groaned, pulling away from him to rub her stomach. "Whoa. Oh, my, " she breathed out, one hand rubbing her abdomen, the other gripping Lee's biceps.

"Was that my daughter?" Lee laughed, looking down as Amanda continued to lightly massage her upper abdomen.

"Or your son," Amanda smiled back. "That was quite a kick he gave me. Have you been teaching him how to do a Roundhouse without telling me?"

"That's my girl," Lee chuckled.

"Or boy," Amanda corrected.

"Right," he agreed.

Amanda turned back into his arms, reaching again to pull his head down to hers. "Now where were we?"

"Ah... " Lee began, the sound muffled as Amanda pressed her lips to his.

She ran her tongue across his teeth, and when given the chance, slipped into the heat of his mouth. Her hands ran down his shoulders and arms, reaching around to clasp his buttocks.

Suddenly she jerked out of his arms, turning away from him. Her shoulders hunched, her left hand going to the small of her back.

"What?" he yelped, reaching out to steady her, his hands on her shoulders. "Oh, my God. You're in labor, aren't you? You're not due until next week. I knew it! I knew it!" His voice raised in panic.

Amanda, the spasm in her lower back now gone, looked up at her husband. Still a bit out of breath from the sharp pain, she asked, "You knew what?"

"I knew that that was a bad idea," he stated firmly.

"What was a bad idea? Lee, I'm not in labor..." Amanda started.

"Fooling around like that. I knew it was a bad idea. I knew this would happen." He ran an agitated hand

through his hair, pacing the room from the windows to the closet and back again. Suddenly he stopped and turned towards Amanda. "Is your bag ready? I'll bring it down to the car. Do you need to change? No, of course you don't. We don't have time. We need to call your mother. And Joe. The boys will want to be at the hospital. Oh, and I'll call Billy. And Francine. No, wait. I can do that at the hospital."

Amanda watched in amazed silence, her mouth gaping open. She'd never heard that many words come out of Scarecrow's mouth at one time in her entire life.

"What are you waiting for?" He grabbed her by the hand and started to lead her out of the nursery.

"Lee, wait a minute," she pulled her hand out of his grasp. He grabbed it back. She pulled it out again. "Lee, calm down. I'm not in labor."

"Amanda, we need to get you..." He paused as her words sunk in. "You're not?"

"Nope," she said, with a firm shake of her head.

"You're not in labor?" he asked, not quite believing her.

"Nope." She shook her head again.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Positively. No labor going on here." She pointed to her stomach and then gave the thumbs down sign.

"How do you know?" he asked, unsure.

"Lee, I've been pregnant twice before. I know the difference between labor pains and a muscle spasm," she tried to reassure him.

"I don't believe you." He narrowed his eyes at her.

"You don't believe me?" she asked, stunned. "Lee, why on earth would I lie to you about this? You're acting crazy."

"No, I'm not and we are going the hospital."

"No, we aren't."

"Yes, we are. I want to make absolutely sure you're not in labor."

"Lee, I've been through this twice before. I know what labor feels like. That was just a little muscle spasm. I'm fine." At his skeptical look she added, "I am definitely NOT going to the hospital."

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Amanda sat in stony silence in the car.

"I'm sorry," Lee looked over at her sheepishly.

"Well, I'm mortified. How can I go back to that hospital again? They think we're crazy people."

"Amanda -- "

She put a finger up and stopped him. "No, amend that. They think YOU'RE a crazy person." She looked out the window of the Wagoneer, her finger tapping in agitation against her knee. "I can't believe you made them page Penny."

"I wanted to be sure."

"Well, are you sure now?" she asked, the sarcasm in her voice unmistakable.

"Yes," he mumbled.

She swung her gaze over to him, her eyes blazing. "You know, I think I've finally figured this out. This craziness."

"What are you talking about?" Lee glanced at her, then back to the road.

"What were we doing when you freaked out?"

"I didn't freak out, Amanda."

"You freaked out, Lee. And we were kissing, that's what we were doing. When was the last time we made love?" Her voice held a twinge of unshed tears.

The Wagoneer swerved slightly. "Amanda -- "

"No. How long has it been since we made love?"

"I don't know... a few weeks." He caught her look. She knew exactly how long it had been. "Maybe a month," he mumbled.

"Try two months, Scarecrow," her voice was unusually hoarse.

"Amanda," Lee pleaded, taking another glance at his wife. She was visibly upset. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the thought of making love to me repulses you," she sniffed past tears that were threatening to overflow.

"What??" The Wagoneer swerved again as Lee looked over at Amanda, this time accompanied by several blaring horns and a passing Buick sporting an impolite hand gesture. "Amanda, that is not true. I love you."

"I know you love me," Amanda huffed. "You just don't want to MAKE love to me. I'm fat. I'm ugly. I'm retaining fluid like the Hoover Dam. I don't blame you." The last sentence came out in a strangled sob.

Lee pulled into the driveway and up to the garage. Before the truck had come to a full stop, Amanda had unhooked her seat belt and jumped from the vehicle.

"Amanda!" Lee jumped from the truck and followed her up the walk and into the house. "Amanda, come back here."

She flung her purse on the couch and turned towards him, wiping at the tears that were streaming down her face. "No, I understand, really. Why would you want to make love to this?" She gestured to her distended belly. "It would be like seducing Shamu at Sea World."

"Amanda, stop!" He grabbed her by the shoulders. Pulling her to him, he wrapped his arms about her. "You don't understand."

"Yes, I do," she wept into his shoulder. "I'm fat and ugly and grotesque."

Lee couldn't help but chuckle a little. "You are not fat. You are definitely not ugly. And I won't even dignify the grotesque comment with a response."

"Then wh... ah... why..." She hiccupped gently, unable to finish.

Lee placed a finger under her chin, gently tilting her head up. "It's not that I don't want to make love to you, Amanda. It's that... I'm afraid to. I'm afraid I'll hurt you."

He could see in her eyes that she didn't believe him. "Amanda, how could I not want you? I love you, you're everything to me."

She pulled out of his arms. "Lee, I don't want to talk about this anymore. I understand, really I do." She walked over to the couch and picked up her purse.

"Amanda --"

"I'm tired, I think I'll lie down and take a nap." She walked past him and up the stairs.

Lee watched her go, not knowing quite what to say or what to do to make things better. They'd been so busy lately, what with tying things up at work so Amanda could go on maternity leave and just dealing with the day to day activities of getting ready for the arrival of this baby. Their physical relationship had just kind of drifted away. He'd simply chalked it up to the way things went during pregnancy. More and more often, Amanda was asleep by the time he came to bed. The last month especially she had seemed to be so awkward, finding it hard to get comfortable and rising several times during the night to go the bathroom. He'd simply figured that she wasn't interested in sex, that it might have even become uncomfortable for her. It's not that he didn't think about it. Hell, he thought about it all the time. He just thought that it was something that naturally got put on hold until after the baby came.

*Now what? Now she thinks I'm not attracted to her. How can she believe that? Because you've been a thoughtless jerk, Stetson, that's how.'*

Lee walked over and plopped dejectedly down on the sofa. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, his mind struggling with what he needed to do to make things right with her. He loved her. He wanted her. He just needed to find a way to prove to her that he wanted and needed her now just as much as he always had.

A small smile turned the corners of his lips. *Of course!*

### **Part 13**

Lee sat at his desk in the Q-Bureau, thumbing through his address book. It was past noon and he'd been meaning to make this call all morning. Strike that. He'd been dreading making this call all morning. But to continue with the plans he had in mind, he'd have to pick up that phone.

Dial that number.

And ask Amanda's OB-GYN if he could make love to his wife.

It vaguely reminded him of when he had to ask his uncle if he could borrow the car when he was sixteen.

He'd thought briefly of asking one of the other guys in the office. Ted Jensen came to mind. The guy had six kids. If anyone would know about it, he would. However, Lee'd chickened out at the last minute. Not that he didn't trust Ted's discretion, but if this should ever get out... he'd never live it down. Nope, better to make the call to Penny.

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He waited until the bathroom door clicked shut. She was going to take a long, hot shower, she'd told him. Long enough, he hoped, to set his plan in motion.

Lee raced downstairs to fetch the silver champagne bucket and ice, along with the sparkling cider and

chocolate covered strawberries he'd picked up at the gourmet supermarket earlier in the afternoon. Taking the stairs two at a time, he raced back to the master bedroom. The shower wasn't running yet, so he knew he still had time.

He turned down the covers of the newly made bed, spritzing them with the lavender spray that Amanda always used when she was trying to 'set the mood.' He stood back, smiling. The bed reminded him of the one that he and Amanda had spent their wedding night in. He purchased the large, antique, four-poster as an anniversary present for Amanda. It was a bed you had to climb up into, and one you never wanted to get out of. It was the bed they conceived their child in. The bed that held the secrets of countless nights of passion and tears and laughter. And soon it would be the bed where Amanda would rest to nurse their child and where this child would find comfort when the night was filled with bad dreams and thunderstorms. Always it would be the bed that held their future....beginning with tonight.

He pulled a shopping bag out of the closet and dug into it, pulling out an assortment of candles, which he placed about the room. After he had lit them all, he walked to the wall switch to turn off the overhead light, making sure he'd achieved the needed atmosphere. He then moved the ice bucket with the chilling cider to the nightstand, along with the silver plate of chocolate covered strawberries.

From under the bed he pulled a Rebecca's Fantasy box. Opening it, he removed a deep blue silk nightgown that the sales lady assured him would fit Amanda's current stage of pregnancy while still making her feel sexy and alluring. The woman had been about eighty, so he wasn't entirely sure he trusted her judgment, but he bought the gown anyway, along with a matching pair of dark blue silk boxers for himself.

He draped the gown over the ottoman and quickly stripped out of his sweat pants and T-shirt to don his new boxers. They were chilled from being in the box under the bed and he suck in a breath as the cold fabric made contact with the most intimate part of his anatomy. He stretched the elastic waistband out and took a quick peek down below, grimacing. *Shrinkage happens*. Hopefully it would thaw before Amanda emerged from her shower.

As if on cue, he heard the shower cut off and the glass shower doors slide open. He sat down on the edge of the bed. He lounged back on the bed, attempting to strike a seductive pose, but then sat bolt upright again. Then he stood, hands at his sides. Then he tried it with his hands on his hips. He looked across at the full length mirror on the back of the closet door. Clad only in the silk boxers, his arms akimbo, he looked like some tawdry Superman stripper from Chippendales. He tried sitting again, this time crossing his leg. *Oh, no*. Now he looked like Stan down in accounting. He finally settled on sitting back, propped against the headboard of the king-size bed, his legs crossed at the ankles. Lacing his fingers over the exposed expanse of stomach above his boxers, he sat back and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

He was just getting ready to knock on the bathroom door and see if Amanda was okay, when he saw the knob move. He took a deep breath and leveled his deadliest bedroom eyes at the bathroom door.

Amanda emerged from the bathroom in a puff of fog and a flannel nightgown, her hair held atop her head in a slightly off center ponytail. Much to Lee's dismay she walked right past him and his bedroom eyes, stopping to adjust the window, opening it just a crack.

She flipped back the comforter and snuggled into bed. That's when she noticed the candles. "Lee, why are all these candles burning?"

Lee looked over at her. "Oh, I don't know," he said in exasperation. "I thought the electric bill was a little high last month and that we should switch to candle power."

It was then she glanced over at him and noticed his attire. Looking back at the candles, her eyes

continued to scan the room. They fell at last on the champagne bucket and strawberries, then snapped back to her husband.

"Are you...?" she gulped. "Are you –"

"Trying to seduce you?" he finished for her. "What gave me away?"

She dropped her face into her hands. "Oh, Lee," came her muffled voice.

He rolled over towards her, pulling her hands away from her face to find her giggling. "I'm glad you think this is so funny." At her look he continued. "It's supposed to be romantic... sexy... evocative... "

"It's wonderful, " Amanda breathed. "But, Lee, you don't have to..."

"I know I don't have to," he said sincerely. "I want to. I always want to." His smile broadened, his cheek dimpling. "I always will, Amanda. Until the day I draw my last breath." His eyes had grown serious, the green deepening to gray, as he pressed her hands to his bare chest. "When we stopped having sex, I thought it was just normal." He released her hands and rose from the bed. Walking to her side of the bed, he stood over her. "You're pregnant, Amanda. I thought the last thing you'd want was me groping you."

"I like your groping." She smiled at him.

"I just had to make sure it was okay. Safe," he continued explaining.

"Lee, I'm always safe with you." Amanda stood up, placing her hands on his chest. "You didn't have to do all this. I was just being silly. Hormonal." She struggled to find the right word. "Pregnant."

Lee chuckled, pulling the ponytail holder from her hair, watching as the chestnut curls bounced and swung about her shoulders. "Boy, I wish you'd told me that before I bought these boxers... and put them on." He plucked at the waistband taking another peek.

"They look great," Amanda grinned, wiggling her eyebrows at him.

"I called Penny," he blurted out.

"You did what?" Amanda's eyes widened.

"I called Penny. I figured why not go to the horse's mouth." He shrugged.

"Good turn of phrase, Stetson," Amanda chuckled, shaking her head and wrapping her arms around her husband's neck. "So, what did she tell you?"

"Did you know that sex can bring on labor?" He leveled a serious look at her.

Amanda frowned, bringing her hands back down to his chest.

"But you're only a week from your due date so she didn't seem to think that would be a problem, even if it did."

Smiling, Amanda's arms traveled back up around his neck.

"And did you know that having an orgasm can actually speed up the labor process... "

Her eyes narrowed and she brought her hands back down to his chest.

"Which means less hours in labor."

Her arms once again traveled back up and around his neck.

"And, did you know that sperm softens the cervix?"

She started to draw her arms away again but paused. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Oh, it's a good thing." Lee nodded. "It makes you dilate faster and easier."

"Faster and easier... sound like two good things when it comes to labor." She nodded back.

Lee reached up to run a finger down her cheek. His mouth dropped to nibble on her bottom lip.

"What else did Penny say, Lee?" Amanda asked as his tongue followed the contour of her upper lip.

"She said," he murmured into her mouth, "to go for it."

## Part 14

Amanda awoke to a gripping pain in her lower back. She eased off the bed slowly, not wanting to wake Lee. If this wasn't labor, no sense in worrying him needlessly... if it was... well, he'd be in for a long haul of it and would be thankful for the extra sleep.

She padded down the hall and into the nursery. Even in the dim, early morning light, the soft pastels of the bunnies and bears theme worked their magic on Amanda and she felt the muscles in her back relaxing. She sat down in the rocker that Lee had presented her with. Draped loosely in ill-fitting wrapping paper and tied up with a big green and red bow, she'd had fun trying to 'guess' what it was. They'd ended up, later that evening, him in the chair, her in his lap, watching the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree and knowing that next year they would be seeing the holiday through a new pair of eyes.

Curling her toes over the bottom rung of the rocker, Amanda pulled a teddy bear off the nearby dressing table, hugging it to her chest. It wouldn't be long now. She smiled, her trembling hands clutching the bear even tighter. She'd never thought she'd look forward to being in labor, but the last two weeks had proved her wrong.

Overdue. Up until now she'd only been acquainted with the word with regard to library books. Now it referenced her condition. She stood slowly, tossing the bear back onto the table. Her stomach strained against the confines of the robe that had fit her only last week. One hand followed the arch of her stomach, coming underneath to support the extra weight and give her back a little relief. She knew her feet and ankles were swollen... not that she could see them, but they felt tight and itchy. She opened her robe and caressed her stomach through the thin material of the navy blue silk nightgown. Tracing a finger around her protruding belly button, she sighed. *Please let this be labor. Please, dear lord, let me deliver this child soon... if not for my sake, then for Lee's sanity.*

As if on cue, another pain started deep in her back, this time slowly traveling around her abdomen to grip it in a vise-like contraction. She breathed deeply, steadying herself with a hand on the dressing table. She tried to relax, breathing as she'd been taught, allowing the pain to wash over her, but not to intimidate her. When it had faded, she eased herself back into the rocking chair.

Amanda knew she should go wake Lee, but she wanted a few more minutes. A few more moments when it was just the two of them. Soon so many people would be there. So many hands helping, easing, and comforting. So many voices reassuring, urging and congratulating. She just wanted to spend a few more precious moments with her unborn baby. Never again would she feel this way. Even if she and Lee had more children, this was a unique moment shared just between her and this child. He... or she... was still part of her, but would never be again. She'd hold it close in her arms for the rest of her life, but would never again be able to give it the protection of her body. *Only the protection of my heart.*

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She climbed into bed, wrapping her arms around her sleeping husband. He grunted softly and rolled onto his back. She sat for a moment, watching him sleep. Pushing the hair from eyes she wondered for the millionth time how he could look sexy even in his sleep. She leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on his parted lips. He stirred, his hand coming up to cup the back of her head and pull her lips more firmly against his own.

"What time is it?" he mumbled, still half asleep.

"Time for you to become a daddy," Amanda whispered against his lips.

"Wha...what?" Lee pulled back from her, running a hand up her arm to grip her shoulder.

"I'm in labor, Lee," she smiled softly at him.

"You're in labor?" he asked, more alert now. "Oh, okay... well, okay." He rolled to the other side of the bed and stumbled across the bedroom floor, his feet tangling in the comforter that had been so carelessly tossed aside in last night's activities. He grabbed the pair of jeans that had landed on the ottoman and started to pull them on.

Amanda laughed softly, leaning back against the headboard of the bed. "Yes. I guess Penny was right, hmmm?"

Lee stopped, his jeans pulled up over his hips, but not zipped or buttoned. He smiled at her obvious reference to their lovemaking. "Yeah, I guess she was. Remind me to thank her, will you?"

"I will," Amanda smiled. "Ah, are you forgetting something?" she gestured to the part of his anatomy that, without benefit of boxers, was now left to fend off the advances of his jeans zipper.

Lee looked down, assessing the situation. "Oh, yeah," he looked over at her sheepishly.

While he adjusted himself, Amanda took a moment to check the contents of her overnight bag. It had been packed for a good month now and checked at least twice a day by Lee, but she wanted to make sure she had everything she needed. Assured that all was ready, she decided it was time to get dressed. As she walked towards the closet another pain hit her. This one started at her pubic bone and worked its way with slow determination up the center of her abdomen. When it ended she felt the warm, wet flow of what she knew was amniotic fluid.

"Lee, my water just broke."

Having just finished zipping and buttoning his jeans, Lee was shrugging into a sweatshirt. His head popped out, his mouth open and his eyes wide. "Oh....okay...."

Amanda watched as he dashed about the room, finding socks and shoes and pulling them on and then running a brush through his tousled hair. He double-checked his back pocket for his wallet, strapped on his wristwatch and turned to find Amanda observing him. "What?"

"It's going to be okay," she assured him with a smile.

"I know that," he huffed back at her. "I'm fine. Don't I look fine?"

"Yes, you look fine, sweetheart," Amanda said, shaking her head and continuing her trek into the closet to get dressed. She pulled on a pair of Lee's sweat pants and an over-sized sweatshirt. Sliding her feet into a pair of sneakers, she tapped the Velcro tabs closed with her toes. The idea had been Lee's and they'd come in very handy once she could no longer reach her feet.

Lee's voice followed her into the walk-in closet. "Well, I am fine. I am in total control of this situation, Amanda."

"Of course you are, honey," she called out to him. *And if you believe that I have a bridge in Brooklyn you might be interested in.*

She walked out to find him slinging her overnight case over his arm, a pillow under his other arm, and a picture of Phillip and Jamie in his hands. "I'm going to go start the car and bring your stuff down. Do you need help getting down the stairs?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'll be with you in a minute. I want to call Mother and check in with Joe and the boys. They'll want to meet us at the hospital."

Reaching for the phone, she heard his heavy footfalls down the stairs and then a muffled curse that accompanied his catching his toe on the plant stand she'd moved into the foyer.

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"Stop laughing." Lee snapped, tossing an annoyed look over at his wife.

She was leaning against the door of the car, trying to stifle her chuckles with the back of her hand. "How..." She broke out laughing again, then visibly tried to calm herself. "How far did you get?"

Lee quickly glanced at her out the corner of his eye, but refused to answer.

"Come on." She started giggling again. "How far did get before you realized I wasn't in the car?"

"I'm glad you think this is so funny," he mumbled sullenly.

"Oh, come on, Lee," Amanda admonished.

The Wagoneer merged onto I-270 and quickly moved into the far left lane. "Lee?"

Thinking that her teasing had ended, he looked over at Amanda.

"Did you get on the Interstate before you noticed?" The question ended in a fit of laughter that was only halted by the arrival of another contraction. "Oh, my," Amanda moaned, the smile dropping from her lips.

Lee's eyes shifted to her, the concern clearly written on his face. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Amanda sighed as the contraction eased. "But you'd better floor this thing... that sperm is really doing its job."

"How are you feeling, Amanda?" Penny leaned over and smiled at her patient.

Amanda finished panting through her last contraction and took a deep, cleansing breath. "Like shit, Penny, I feel like shit."

Lee grimaced an apology to the obstetrician, then attempted to extricate himself from the bone-crushing grip that Amanda had on his hand.

"Ah, ha..." Penny responded, ignoring her patient's obviously pain-induced lapse of good manners. She replaced the chart she'd been looking at and moved to the foot of the bed, flipping back the sheet to examine Amanda. "Well, you're coming along nicely. It shouldn't be too long now."

"No chance I can get a little something to take the edge off?" Amanda asked through gritted teeth. "A Valium, a Percocet...a shot of vodka?"

"There isn't time, Amanda," Penny explained. "You were too far gone by the time you got here. You're almost ready to deliver."

"Damn sperm," she muttered under her breath.

Lee reached over to dab at her forehead with a cool, damp cloth, but she brusquely pushed him away. "I don't need a sponge bath," she snapped at him.

Lee grabbed her hand from where it twisted in the sheets. "Let me help you," he urged. "You keep pushing me away. I just want to help you through this, Amanda."

Another contraction curtailed any response from Amanda, as she gripped Lee's hand and panted through the pain.

Lee ran his fingers through her sweat-soaked hair, leaning down to murmur something to her, his lips pressed to her ear. She gave a shaky smile as the pain eased and looked over into his hazel eyes. "I'm sorry... I love you," she whispered back to him.

He kissed her lips and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Repositioning the picture of the boys on the table near the foot of the bed, he clasped her left hand between his two. "Focus on that, sweetheart." He could feel her hand tightening on his again. "Breathe, Amanda. That's it. You can do this, baby. You can. Just feel yourself opening up, don't fight it."

She pushed her forehead into his cheek, letting his voice and his touch ease some of the tension from her body. This had been so much harder than she had expected. Maybe it was just being older, but she just felt drained and on the edge of losing it both physically and emotionally.

"Okay, Amanda," Penny said, stepping away from the foot of the bed. "It's time...let's get you ready to deliver this baby."

"Lee?" Amanda looked up into his eyes.

"I'm right here, sweetheart. Right here," he whispered to her as the doctor and nurses prepared her for the delivery.

## **Part 15**

Lee's arms trembled as he helped his wife lean forward so that she could strain to push their unborn child into the world. Her usually curly hair, now laden with sweat from the hour or so of active labor, was matted and plastered to her neck and face. Her effort finished for the moment, she leaned back into Lee's arms. He could feel the fatigue in her muscles and in the way her head sank against his shoulder, her eyes closed. The moments in between having to push seemed so short; too short for her to regain any amount of strength. He would have done anything at that moment to trade places with her, to take the pain away from her body and place it within his own. But there was nothing he could do, and feelings of frustration and fear kept threatening to wash over him as he watched her continue to struggle.

He tossed a weary glance to Penny, who was positioned between Amanda's legs. The doctor's blue eyes met his own and her smile softened his anxiety a bit.

Lee leaned down, his lips pressed to Amanda's ear. "You're doing so well, Amanda. Just a little bit more, Sweetheart."

Amanda opened weary brown eyes and gave him the start of a quivering smile before another contraction and another order from Penny to push brought them back to the business at hand. She clenched his hand in hers as she pushed and grunted through the contraction and Penny's encouragement that it would not be much longer.

"Okay, Amanda," Penny's called out. "You're going to feel a pinch, I'm giving you a local so we can do an episiotomy."

Amanda grimaced and Lee again glanced to Penny.

"It's okay," she explained. "It's better to do it this way than to let it tear."

Penny administered the injection and picked up the surgical scissors to make the incision. They had placed a mirror so that both Lee and Amanda could see the progression of delivery; now, however, Amanda's eyes were shut in concentration and Lee's were focused on his wife's features.

"There," Penny said, finishing her task, "Now we have some room to work. Okay, Amanda, I want you to give me a big push with the next contraction."

When the time came, Amanda leaned forward with a groan as Lee supported her back and shoulders. Penny watched as Amanda and Lee seemed to merge into one in an effort to push the child from her body. She looked back and smiled, watching the crowning of a dark head appear as payment for their efforts.

"Oh, my God," Lee whispered, watching in the mirror as the baby's head crowned and then disappeared.

"Okay, I think this next one is going to do it. Lee, do you want to come down here and help me out?" She smiled at him.

Lee nodded, wide-eyed, watching as a nurse took over his position at Amanda's shoulders. He went to stand next to Penny, his mind desperately willing his knees and hands to stop their shaking. This was it. This was the moment they'd both waited nine months for. His mouth suddenly became very dry and he swallowed what felt like a tennis ball in his throat. How could this be happening? Unbidden, his mind quickly flitted back to that fateful fall day on the train platform at Union Station. He was rushing towards a woman... a woman whom he had known, in one heartbeat, would help him. He hurried towards her, and in that moment they began the journey towards a future that no one could have ever predicted. She'd very simply taken the package from him. No thunder rolled. No cymbals clanged. No marching bands or fireworks marked the occasion. And yet, in that one instant they set into motion an adventure that would change them both. From that moment to this one. One chance meeting gave them both the opportunity to trust again, to become friends and partners, to become lovers, and now... to bring into the world a little part of both of them.

The poignancy of the moment washed over Lee, his eyes filling with tears. Together they'd moved from that fateful beginning to this moment. Together they'd created a life. A life that was at this moment fighting to come into the world. A life that Lee wanted more than anything to hold in his arms. He watched in amazement, his heart pounding as if it might escape from his chest, as his daughter pushed free of Amanda's straining body and into Penny's capable hands.

"Looks like we can add a girl to the clan," Penny laughed, placing the tiny, screaming infant onto Amanda's abdomen and turning to Lee. "I need your help here, Lee," she said as she clamped off the umbilical cord.

A nurse handed him a pair of surgical scissors and, with trembling hands, he cut the lifeline between his daughter and her mother. He watched as Penny siphoned out her nose and mouth. After wrapping a blanket around her and placing a tiny cap on her head, she offered Lee his daughter. "Here, Daddy," she

said. "Why don't you bring her over and introduce her to her Mommy?"

Lee looked down into the tiny face of his daughter. She'd stopped screaming and was now red, wrinkly, and simply the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his whole life. She made a small mewling sound, scrunching up her face, and his heart exploded into a million pieces. He moved a step closer, gently taking her into his arms. He'd been so afraid of this moment, holding his child for the first time. But she felt so natural there, her tiny body fitting snugly into the crook of his elbow, her arms and legs softly pushing against the cotton blanket.

"Hey," came a weary voice from beside him. "She's going to be Daddy's girl her whole life... can I get her for a minute?"

Lee looked down into the weary face of his wife. With a smile that threatened to take over his face, and eyes still bright with tears, he placed their daughter into her waiting arms. He leaned over and pressed his lips to Amanda's. "I love you," he whispered into her mouth, the words tangling with the tears in his throat. "I love you so much."

As he pulled back, Amanda reached up to wipe at the tearstains on his cheeks. "I love you, too," she whispered back, blinking back her own tears. "Thank you for our beautiful daughter." Her fingers stayed on his face, running lightly back and forth across the slight stubble on his chin.

Penny walked up to the other side of the bed, hating to interrupt the moment. "Amanda, why don't you let us get her cleaned up, and then you can nurse her?"

A few minutes later, the nurse returned to Amanda's bedside, holding the precious bundle, now wrapped in a pink receiving blanket and wearing a matching knit cap. "Lee could you... " Amanda asked, nodding toward the baby.

He once again held their daughter as Amanda adjusted her gown. When she was ready, he returned the baby to Amanda's arms and watched as his daughter began to nurse at her breast. In awe, he watched as mother and daughter became one, bonding and communicating with each other without benefit of words. He took a step back, enjoying the vision before him.

He took a moment to offer up a prayer of thanks to whomever had lead him to this place in his life. Be it from the grace of some all-powerful higher being, a grand destiny, or simply fate, he knew that he'd been handed a great gift. Just a few short years ago, Amanda had helped him find meaning in his life; helped him learn what it meant to love and be loved. And now, just when he'd thought himself the expert... thought his heart knew all the mysteries and secrets that love had to offer...he learned that the lessons of love never ended.

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Billy Melrose exited the elevator and turned left around the corner. Passing the long glass wall, his eyes ran quickly over the name plates attached to the front of each incubator. At last he located the one he was looking for. Baby Girl Stetson. But it was empty. With a frown he continued down the hall to the nurses station.

"I'm looking for Amanda Stetson's room," he asked a young woman sitting behind the counter, jotting notes in a file. Glancing up at a marker board, she wrote down the room number and handed it back to Billy.

He walked halfway down the corridor and stopped in front of Room 617. Knocking softly, he waited, then knocked again. Hesitantly, he pushed the door open and peeked into the dimly lit room. His eyes glanced over the baskets and vases of flowers that were perched on every available counter space, then settled on the sight of Amanda, slumbering peacefully in bed, the standard white hospital issue blanket pulled up to her chin, her hands resting lightly on her chest.

Scarecrow was sprawled, asleep, in a chair that had been pulled up close to Amanda, his feet propped up on the bed. His mouth was open, and a soft snore told Billy that the younger man had had a busy evening and morning and obviously needed the rest.

He placed the bouquet of flowers and the large pink stuffed bunny on the stand at the foot of the bed and turned to leave.

"Billy," a hoarse, sleep-filled voice caught him, his hand on the door. Billy turned to see Lee moving from the chair. "Don't leave... I'm awake."

Billy smiled into the face of his favorite agent and friend. "Just barely, Scarecrow."

"Yeah, well..." Lee ran a hand through his tousled hair. "Say, look, Billy, Amanda is going to be down for the count. She just finished nursing the baby and they gave her something for the pain so she's gonna sleep for a while. The nurse just took the baby to bathe her. How about we go grab a cup of coffee and then I'll take you and introduce you to my daughter."

Billy clasped Lee's hand, then pulled him into a bear hug. "Now those are some words I never thought I'd hear coming from the mouth of Scarecrow." The older man chuckled, releasing Lee and stepping back.

"Yeah," Lee shrugged, smiling bashfully. "I can't quite believe it myself. But, God, Billy," he swallowed the lump that formed in his throat at the thought of his daughter. "She's beautiful. She looks just like Amanda." He smiled broadly, his eyes sparkling. "And when I held her the first time..." his voice cracked, as his emotions threatened to run away with him. Clearing his throat, he looked at his old friend and realized that this man knew exactly how he was feeling. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and reached out to open the door. "Let's get that cup of coffee. I have a lot to tell you."

"I bet you do, Scarecrow," Billy smiled at his friend. "I sure bet you do."

## **Epilogue**

"Sweetheart, there's mail for you," she called out. She listened as she heard him turn off the computer in the den and walk into the kitchen. She handed him the square, brown envelope.

"Wonder who this is from," he pondered aloud, prying open the flap.

"No return address?" she asked, looking over from finishing up the salad they were going to have for dinner that night.

He flipped the envelope over to check once more. "Nope, just a Rockville post-mark." He finished opening the envelope, pulling out two pieces of cardboard, taped together. "Gee, this is strange," he said, separating the cardboard and looking at what it enclosed.

"What's that, honey?" His wife walked away from the counter and peered over his shoulder. She glanced from her husband to the picture he held in his hands. "Is that someone you know?"

"Nope," he shook his head. "Cute shot though, huh?"

Linda smiled at her husband. For as long as she'd known him he'd always been a sucker for kids. "Yes, it is. Wonder who they are and why they sent us this picture?"

"Probably just some mix-up," Dean shrugged, tossing the picture onto the counter with the rest of the mail.

His wife walked over and picked it up, taking a closer look at the snapshot. It was a close up of a man in jeans and a t-shirt stretched out on a couch, a tiny newborn baby propped on his chest. Both were sound

asleep, the infant sucking its fist. Linda turned the photo over. There was a note in feminine script. It said simply...*Thank You.*

**THE END**